THE BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY & ART OF ANIMATION AND VFX · ANIMATIONMAGAZINE.NET

JANUARY 2026

ANIMATION MAGAZINE™

AVAST YE!

THE SPONGEBOB MOVIE: SEARCH FOR SQUAREPANTS MAKES A BIG SPLASH THIS MONTH!

+

A MAGNIFICENT LIFE

ENDLESS COOKIE

DOG OF GOD

26 PICS TO CATCH IN '26

THE VFX MAGIC OF WICKED: FOR GOOD

AND MUCH, MUCH MORE!

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ANIMATION MAGAZINE

JANUARY 2026
VOLUME 40, ISSUE 1, NUMBER 355

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Pow!

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ON THE COVER

Paramount's holiday release *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants* opens in theaters on Dec. 10.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
BEST ANIMATED FEATURE
BEST ORIGINAL SONG
"GOLDEN"

5 GRAMMY® NOMINATIONS

INCLUDING

SONG OF THE YEAR

"THE BEST ANIMATED FILM OF THE YEAR."
THEWRAP., Drew Taylor

"A LOVE LETTER
to the power of voices
bringing people together."
NBP, Nadia Dalimonte

"A HEARTFELT STORY
about generational burdens and the
eventual embracing of your identity."
EMPIRE, Kelechi Ehenulo

K-POP DEMON HUNTERS

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SpongeBob & Other Dependable Joys of the Season

ANIMATION MAGAZINE
CELEBRATING 10 YEARS HAPPY!
Will the New SpongeBob Movie Restore our Faith in Humanity?
SpongeBob's New Horizon

As we were preparing this new issue, the perplexing question that kept haunting us was this: How did the final month of 2025 arrive so quickly? Fortunately, this month's ever-so-optimistic and absorbent coverboy, SpongeBob, was there to cheer us up with the promise of another bright-eyed, sea-faring adventure in his fourth theatrical outing. Our longtime contributor Tom McLean takes us on an informative behind-the-scenes journey through the making of *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for Squarepants* feature, which is directed by series veteran Derek Drymon. We hope this cover story will whet your appetite for Paramount's movie, which opens in theaters on Dec. 19. By the way, this marks the fifth time the yellow *éponge* graces the cover of our magazine — an impressive record for any animated character, sea-dwelling or otherwise.

This year-end issue also features a spotlight on French auteur Sylvain Chomet's latest movie *A Magnificent Life*. The beautifully crafted 2D-animated movie, which played in Cannes and Annecy earlier this year, has finally opened in U.S. theaters, just in time for award season. Chomet was kind enough to talk to us about his third feature, which arrives 22 years after the global success of his first feature, *The Triplets of Belleville*.

As we went to press, we also got word that Disney's *Zootopia 2* has broken all kinds of global box office records during its first five days of release. Byron Howard and Jared Bush's mighty sequel delivered the highest global opening ever for an animated movie ($556 million), and the highest global opening for an animated sequel. In addition, it became the highest global debut of 2025, as well as having the biggest single-day opening for a U.S. film in China ($34 million). Not bad for a movie featuring 178 animated characters, spanning 67 different species! Who says audiences don't want to see their animated movies projected in big theaters anymore?

If you're feeling optimistic, we invite you to take a look at the list of 26 animated features we have high hopes for in 2026. We know a lot of the details are going to change in the months to come as studios love to shuffle their release dates around just to keep us on our toes. They also enjoy announcing their super-secret vocal cast a couple of weeks before the actual release dates, so just think of our list as an abstract reminder of things to look forward to in the next 12 months. After all, DreamWorks wouldn't even let us see the title treatment from their much-anticipated 2026 feature *Forgotten Island*! But don't worry. We'll post everything online the minute the powers that be make them available to the toon-hungry masses.

Well, that's it for now. On behalf of everyone at the magazine, I want to wish you, our dear loyal readers, a quiet and peaceful holiday season. We hope you'll be surrounded by kind and non-argumentative loved ones. And if your friends, family and good pets are not close by, may you have access to lots of good food, beverages and entertaining animated movies, TV shows and shorts to make your days and nights as merry as possible. We'll see you next year!

Ramin Zahed
Editor in Chief
ramin@animationmagazine.net

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"Something we felt in the first *Zootopia* movie was that people saw *themselves*, their stories and their relationships in that movie. And I'd think hopefully in the sequel, they do again. This is a story about two animals who are different — and do those differences matter or not? If they do matter, how do you get through that, or what do you learn about each other? Are you ever *too* different from someone else to hear them and understand them?

Disney CCO and *Zootopia 2* director Jared Bush in *D23.com*

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FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
BEST ANIMATED FEATURE
"One of the most VISUALLY STUNNING, FUNNIEST, and BEAUTIFULLY TOUCHING films of the year."
COLLIDER
"Effortlessly balances HUMOR, IMAGINATION, and HEARTFELT EMOTION."
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Animation Planner/December 2025

CoComelon Lane

Jujutsu Kaisen: Execution

Endless Cookie

Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw

Transformers: EarthSpark

1

Catch JJ's next adventures in ***CoComelon Lane* S5** on Netflix.

5

Anime fans can preview the upcoming ***Culling Game*** arc on the big screen in ***Jujutsu Kaisen: Execution*** (GKIDS), while indie cinephiles won't want to miss the animated doc ***Endless Cookie*** (Obscured Releasing). On streaming, Disney+ debuts ***Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw***, while Paramount+ brings back the Cybertronians in two new ***Transformers: EarthSpark*** specials.

8

Preliminary voting for the ***98th Academy Awards*** opens today, ballots are due by 5 p.m. PT Dec. 12. Aspiring Padawans can catch ***Star Wars: Young Jedi Adventures S3*** on Disney+ and Disney Jr.

12

Mamoru Hosoda's eagerly awaited revenge tale ***Scarlet*** arrives in theaters for an awards season run (Sony).

15

Furry mysteries unfold in ***The Creature Cases* S6** on Netflix.

16

Find out which animated shorts made the ***Oscar Shortlist*** cut today!

19

The Bikini Bottom heroes quest for the Flying Dutchman in ***The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*** in theaters (Paramount).

22

The lovably chaotic Watterson family returns in ***The Wonderfully Weird World of Gumball* S2**, streaming today on Hulu.

Star Wars: Young Jedi Adventures

Scarlet

The Creature Cases

The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants

The Wonderfully Weird World of Gumball

FESTIVALS

ANIAFF NEW!
Nagoya, Japan
aniaff.com

Animateka
Ljubljana, Slovenia
animateka.si

ANNY Best of Fest
New York, NY
animationnights.com

GLAS
W. Hollywood, CA
glasanimation.com

LAAF
Los Angeles, CA
laafest.com

Les Nuits Magiques
Bordeaux, France
lesnuitsmagiques.fr

LIAF
London, U.K.
liaf.org.uk

Punto y Raya
Sofia, Bulgaria
puntoyrayafestival.com

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please email edit@animationmagazine.net

"An impressive visual feast, with dazzling spectacle that's highly detailed and impressively designed. Mamoru Hosoda has been one of the most prolific directors in Japanese animation for some time now. The gorgeous display of artistic vistas being projected is an absolute vision."

-Josh Parham, NEXT BEST PICTURE

"An awe-inspiring fantasy that transcends time and space, life and death, and everything in between. The imagery is instantly stunning and jaw-dropping."

-Kevin L. Lee, AWARDS WATCH

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION IN ALL CATEGORIES INCLUDING

BEST PICTURE

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

BEST DIRECTOR
Mamoru Hosoda

BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY
Mamoru Hosoda

BEST SOUND
Hiroaki Sato Kousuke Kobayashi
Hiroki Matsuura Remi Kurashima

FROM ACADEMY AWARD®-NOMINATED

MAMORU HOSODA

Scarlet

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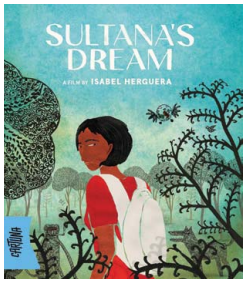
The Must-Have List

By Mercedes Milligan

DISCS



Hazbin Hotel Season One
Prime Video's hilarious hell-bound musical series gets a physical release with cast commentary on all 8 episodes and a limited-edition trading card in each set!
A24 / $25 BD

Sultana's Dream
Director Isabel Herguera brings an early work of feminist sci-fi to life in this indie animated feature. Incudes director's & writer's commentary, making-of and 5 shorts by Herguera.
Cartuna / $27 BD / Dec. 30

Perfect Blue Collector's Edition
Satoshi Kon's psychological thriller masterpiece arrives in a stunning remaster with 117 mins. of director's lectures, "Angel of Your Heart" recording session, cast & crew interviews plus a 128-page booklet, poster and 10 art cards.
Shout! ***Factory / $79 4K / Dec. 23***

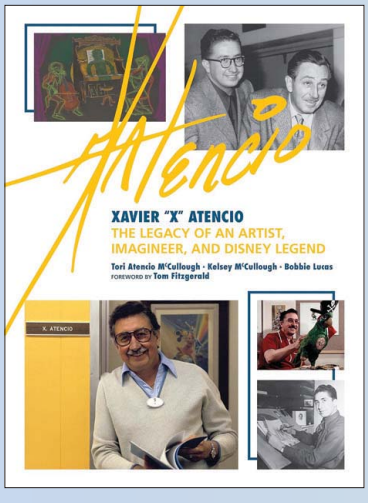
Arcane Season Two Collector's Edition
The award-winning *League of Legends* series' final season deluxe set includes 3+ hours of bonus content, exclusive original art, 7 Anomaly dice and velvet pouch, Acceleration Rune temporary tattoos, Hexgates poster, Viktor's Gear enamel pin, three fancy art cards and *Ekko's Notebook* episode guide.
GKIDS Exclusive / $150 4K / Dec. 11

Kaiju No. 8 Season 1 Limited Edition
Enjoy the hit anime's monster-sized action with fun extras, 160-page art book, acrylic standee, 5 art cards and a metal-finish art card.
Crunchyroll / $95 BD

The Emperor's New Groove
Celebrate the 25th anniversary of Disney's ancient Peruvian romp with a new 4K set. Directed by Mark Dindal, the 2D favorite features the voices of David Spade, John Goodman, Eartha Kitt and Patrick Warburton.
Disney / $46 4K

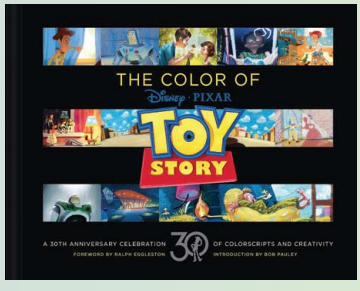
Throwback Sets
Tom & Jerry: The Golden Anthology (WB, $68), *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostoro* SteelBook (Crunchyroll, $50), *Wally Gator: The Complete Series* (WB, $25), *Lippy the Lion and Hardwy Har Har: The Complete Series*
WB / $28

BOOKS


Atencio
XAVIER "X" ATENCIO
THE LEGACY OF AN ARTIST, IMAGINEER, AND DISNEY LEGEND
Tori Atencio McCullough · Kelsey McCullough · Bobbie Lucas
FOREWORD BY Tom Fitzgerald

Xavier "X" Atencio: The Legacy of an Artist, Imagineer and Disney Legend
From apprentice animator on *Pinocchio* to the lyricist behind "Yo Ho, Yo Ho A Pirates Life for Me," X's Disney career was diverse, and his legacy inspiring. For the first time, his creativity and humor come to life in a new book which relates his life and career, set against the evolution of The Walt Disney Company. Authors Tori Atencio McCullough, Kelsey McCullough and Bobbie Lucas are our guides, and their biography is well populated by previously unpublished artwork and photos from X's personal collection.
Disney Editions / $40

The Art of Zootopia 2
Fans of Disney's urban animal caper will want to get their paws on this colorful hardcover, which dives into the making of the new sequel. Penned by Kalikolehua Hurley (*The Art of Moana 2*) with foreword by directors Jared Bush and Byron Howard and producer Yvett Merino, the book is a safari tour through the whole development and production process. Sink your fangs into full-color character designs, storyboards, color scripts and behind-the-scenes details!
Chronicle Books / $45



The Color of Toy Story: A 30th Anniversary Celebration of Colorscripts and Creativity
Look back three decades to the beginning of Pixar's seminal animation franchise with this portable-sized collection. More nightstand than coffee table book at just under seven by nine inches, the anniversary release presents the full story arc of Woody, Buzz and the gang across the four *Toy Story* feature films through the colorscripts created by the studio's esteemed artists.
Chronicle Books / $35

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

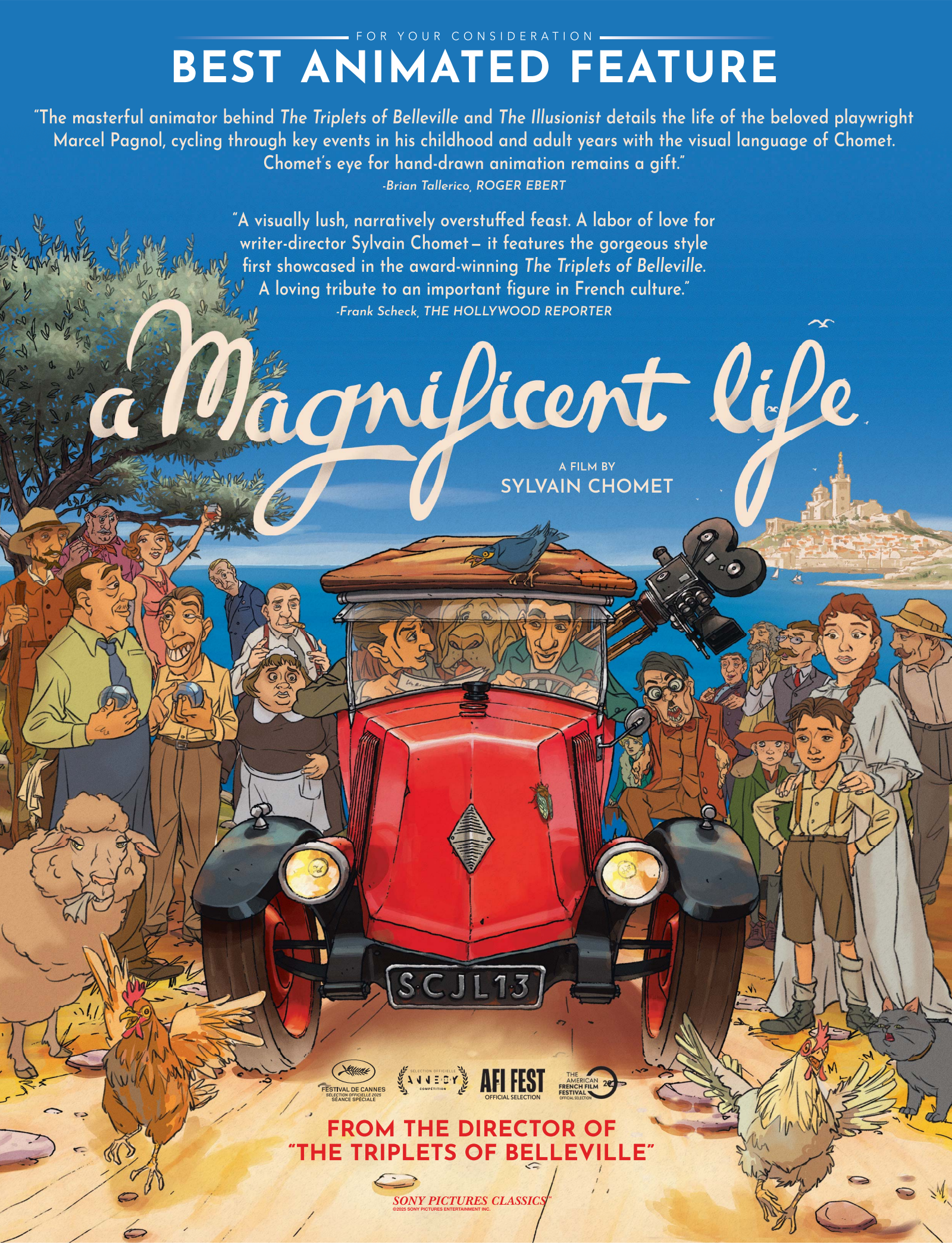
BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

"The masterful animator behind *The Triplets of Belleville* and *The Illusionist* details the life of the beloved playwright Marcel Pagnol, cycling through key events in his childhood and adult years with the visual language of Chomet. Chomet's eye for hand-drawn animation remains a gift."

-Brian Tallerico, ROGER EBERT

"A visually lush, narratively overstuffed feast. A labor of love for writer-director Sylvain Chomet – it features the gorgeous style first showcased in the award-winning *The Triplets of Belleville*. A loving tribute to an important figure in French culture."

-Frank Scheck, THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER



FROM THE DIRECTOR OF "THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE"

SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

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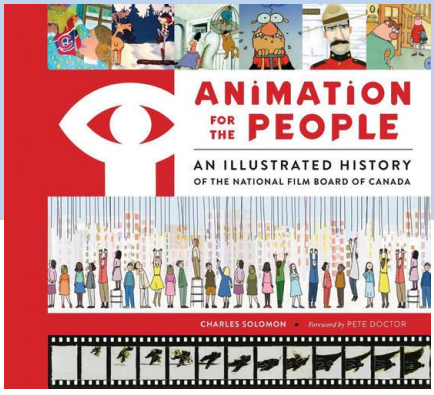
A Canadian Charmer Revisited

Alison Snowden and David Fine recall the making of their Oscar-winning short *Bob's Birthday* in a wonderful new book about the NFB.


ANIMATION FOR THE PEOPLE
AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY
OF THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA
CHARLES SOLOMON
Foreword by PETE DOCTOR

The following is an excerpt from the acclaimed new hardcover book, **Animation for the People: An Illustrated History of the National Film Board of Canada** *by Charles Solmon*
Published by Abrams, 256 pages, $60

By Charles Solomon

Alison Snowden and David Fine won the Oscar and the Genie for the hilarious *Bob's Birthday* (1994). The film opens with Margaret Fish gleefully putting the finishing touches on a surprise 40th birthday party for her dentist husband. At his office, Bob is experiencing a midlife crisis: He moons over his dowdy assistant and endures his patients' nattering.

"We both had 30th birthday surprises that had kind of gone wrong. So the idea was about the stress of trying to plan a surprise, rather than what's the worst way the surprise can go wrong," says Snowden. Fine agrees, "You become so stressed that it doesn't work out, plus having to lie to make it happen. But what if that lie backfires — which happened to us in both cases."

When Bob returns home, before the guests can jump out of their hiding places, he starts complaining — not only about feeling old and unattractive, but about how much he dislikes the unseen guests. Margaret tries to salvage the situation, asserting, "The Greenspoons are our best friends, you were just saying that the other day." Bob indignantly replies, "You like them even less than I do. Every time we see them you stay up all night talking about how boring they are." As Margaret bolts upstairs in embarrassment, Bob calls after her, "It's not your fault — they *are* boring. All our friends are boring."

"When we were making *George & Rosemary*, we saw *The Big Snit* and almost got depressed: we thought it's so good," Fine recalls. "This is the film that we want to be making. We thought 'arguing couple — we've gotta do something like that with dialog." And that was eventually *Bob's Birthday*.

Snowden and Fine recast the voices at the last minute. "We had hired quite a famous English actor to play Bob — it was a big coup for us to get this guy. But he did Bob too depressive," Fine explains. "It just sounded heavy and was killing the comedy. We heard Andy Hamilton, who's a well-known TV writer/producer, being interviewed on the radio. We looked at each other, and went 'That's it!' I called the radio station, and the next day he called us back."

Allison Snowden and David Fine

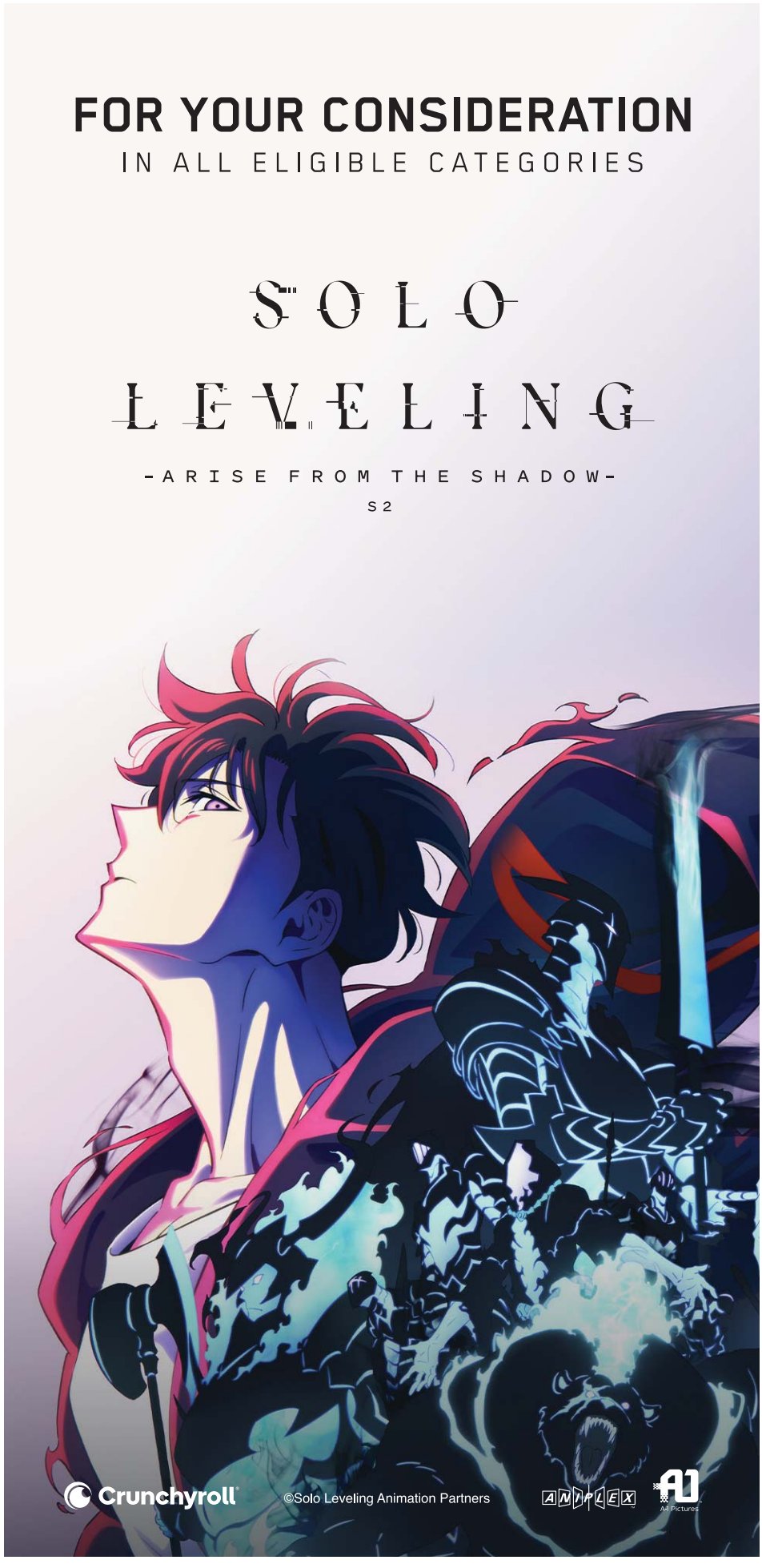
Snowden adds, "We cast a professional actress as Margaret, but she didn't do the

panic scenes very well. Derek Lamb suggested me, and I tried recording some of it. David will deny this, but he was very critical of using me for the voice at the beginning." Fine concedes, "I kept thinking, 'It's Alison's voice, we're copping out by not finding a professional actor.' It took a tiny amount of pitching up to make Margaret a little more cartoony. Alison would push the voice a little higher and it got a little sillier."

"We both had 30th birthday surprises that had kind of gone wrong. So the idea was about the stress of trying to plan a surprise, rather than what's the worst way the surprise can go wrong."
WRITER-DIRECTOR ALISON SNOWDEN

The short was adapted to television as *Bob and Margaret* (1993), which ran for four seasons. Snowden and Fine found producing a television series very different from making an independent film. "You're feeding this conveyer belt with scripts," Snowden says. "To us, the scripts are everything. For them, it's more important to keep on time and budget. We had some very good writers, they had funny ideas, but we always tried to bring it back to those two particular personalities."

"The TV series was on Comedy Central in the U.S., Global TV in Canada and Channel 4 in Britain," Fine adds. "It was suddenly out there for millions to see, and that was quite thrilling. Back in the day, you made a short film, and it would be at festivals — it was pretty rare to have your film out there and get seen." ■



A Summit to Remember

The 2025 edition of *Animation Magazine*'s **World Animation Summit** and the annual **Hall of Fame Awards** proved to be a resounding success last month. Despite the torrential rain on opening night on Monday, the event held at The Garland in N. Hollywood posted record attendance numbers and offered packed panels, keynotes and networking parties, bringing the global animation community together for three memorable days.

Hosted by everyone's favorite voice actor, Emmy winner **Eric Bauza** (the voice of Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, Bugs Bunny and many other toon faves), the 13th edition of the Hall of Fame Awards honored a diverse selection of talented men and women who have made a major impact on the art form and business of animation.

2025 HONOREES

Loren Bouchard— Creator, *Bob's Burgers*

Maggie Kang & Chris Appelhans— Directors, *KPop Demon Hunters* — Movie of the Year Award (accepted by Appelhans and producer **Michelle Wong**)

Fumi Kitahara— beloved animation publicity executive (posthumous award), accepted by Fumi's husband, director **Simon Otto**

Juan Jose Meza-León— Director, *Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires* — New Vision Award

Tim Miller— Creator/Exec Producer; *Love, Death + Robots*, *Secret Level*

Kristen Schaal — Actress, *Bob's Burgers*, *Gravity Falls*, *Toy Story 4*

Linda Simensky— Animation Creative Executive; Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, PBS Kids

Matt Stone & Trey Parker— Creators, *South Park*

Studio 100 International/President Martin Krieger— International Studio of the Year Award

Alex Woo— Director, *In Your Dreams* — New Vision Award

We were also thrilled to have the likes of Disney legends **Ron Clements** and **John Musker,** show creator **Craig McCracken**, VFX visionary **Jerome Chen**, director and creative producer **Jennifer Coyle**, actors **H. Jon Benjamin** and **Simu Liu**, and *KPop Demon Hunters* vocalist **Rei Ami** on hand to present the awards at the ceremony.

Rei Ami

Ron Clements and John Musker

Simu Liu

2025 RECIPIENTS

Alex Woo

Linda Simensky

Loren Bouchard

Kristen Schaal

Trey Parker and Matt Stone

Juan Jose Meza-León

Tim Miller

Martin Krieger

Simon Otto

Chris Appelhans and Michelle Wong

Photos: Will Thoren

PANELS AND KEYNOTES

Bugs Bunny's Boss: Warner Bros. Pictures Animation president Bill Damaschke

Wonder Women: Hannah Minghella (Netflix Animation & Family Film), Kristine Belson (Sony Pictures Animation) and Margie Cohn (DreamWorks Animation)

Claynosaurz co-founder and CCO Nic Cabana

Awards Contenders Panel, Part 1: From left, Peter Hastings (*Dog Man*), Carrie Liao (*Zootopia 2*) Ugo Bienvenu (*Arco*), Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans (*KPop Demon Hunters*)

Awards Contenders Panel, Part 2: From left, Alex Woo (*In Your Dreams*), Pierre Perifel (*The Bad Guys 2*), Derek Drymon (*The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*), David Jesteadt (GKIDS) and Mamoru Hosoda (*Scarlet*)

Adults Only: From left, Alex Rubins (*Krapopolis*), Michael Price (*The Simpsons*), Simon Raccopia (*Invincible*) and Eric Towner (Stoopid Buddy Stoodios), front: Mike Hollingsworth (*BoJack Horseman*)

International Co-Pros: From left, Sander Schwartz, Vani Balgam, Frank Falcone, David Michel, Aaron Behl and Aaron Berger

This year's record-breaking World Animation Summit offered a hopeful primer on navigating a changing biz.

PANELS AND KEYNOTES

Shorts Contenders: From left, Brooke Keesling, Aaron Blaise, Nathan Engelhardt, Giovanna Ferrari, Shabrayia Cleaver, Malcon Pierce, Damián Perea and Matteo Burani.

Getting the Greenlight: From left, Karen Miller, David Weidenfeld, Ingrid Tous Tovar, Jason Caparaz and Katie Petrachonis

Next Stop, Exandria: From left, moderator Jennifer Wolfe and *The Mighty Nein*'s Tasha Huo and Sam Riegel.

Colombia, the Country of Beauty: A selection of talented professionals from Colombia's thriving animation scene discussed the benefits of partnering with their studios.

How We Got Our Show Made: From Left, John Derevlany, Emily Brundige, Genevieve LeDoux, Mike Roth, Kiana Khansmith and Joe Cappa.

Lion Forge in the House: From left, Koyalee Chandra and Kerri Grant discuss their careers and upcoming projects.

How to Survive in Animation: From left, Rita Street, Julia Pistor, Gregg Taylor, Marge Dean, Joe Sichta and Rick Mischel.

A BIG THANKS to all our generous sponsors, and event director **Kim Derevlany** for producing such a fantastic event this year. We are also grateful for our amazing team of volunteers (led by **Jan Nagel**), **Heather Gaberman, Beste Demirel, Monique Muepo, Matthew Silverman, Camille Furman Collot, Jeff Nuss** and his tech team**, Jan Bayouth,** and ofcourse, *Animation Magazine* president **Jean Thoren** for launching the Summit 13 years ago! We hope to see everyone again in November of 2026 with an even bigger and better event! **You can find all our photos from the event, including party and red-carpet shots at animationmagazine.net/summit.**

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Heather Gaberman and Summit Director Kim Derevlany

Dynamic keynote artist Jorge R. Gutierrez, Sherry Gunther Shugerman and Nic Cabana talk toons at the Summit. (Photo courtesy of Cabana)

From left, LAIKA's development lead/producer Peter McCown, writer-director Chris Butler (*ParaNorman, The Missing Link)* and director Thibault Leclercq *(ParaNorman: The Thrifting)* celebrate the studio's 20th anniversary.

Producer Rich Magallanes (*Dora*) and Inspidea co-founder C.J. See

From left, *Bob's Burgers* actors Dan Mintz and H. Jon Benjamin were on hand to celebrate Hall of Fame honorees Kristen Schaal and Loren Bouchard.

Nic Cabana, center, and the Claynosaurz Gang.

Fumi Kitahara's sister Hiroko, son Max and husband Simon Otto celebrate the memory of the much-loved publicist. (Photo courtesy of Olivier Mouroux, Netflix)

Digitz Film CEO Felipe Morell and *Animation Magazine* president Jean Thoren.

From left, Lisa Goldman, Heather Kenyon, Justine Bannister, Rene Veilleux, Claudia Scott-Hansen, Donald Roman Lopez and Camila Gomez know how to strike animated poses.

Damián Perea Lezcano gets a lift from Farnaz Esnaahsari-Charmatz.

Hall of Fame Awards host Eric Bauza.

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THE SPONGE SAILS AGAIN!

Director Derek Drymon and his team discuss the return of Nickelodeon's optimistic yellow guy in the inventive *3D The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*.

BY TOM MCLEAN

The sea runs deep, and so does SpongeBob SquarePants. How else can you explain the Nickelodeon animation franchise's continued success more than 25 years after its debut?

The most recent iteration of the square yellow dude's story is *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*, the fourth theatrical SpongeBob feature, which arrives Dec. 19 in theaters. This time, SpongeBob is trying to be a big guy, and to prove it to Mr. Krabs, he follows the Flying Dutchman to the deepest part of the sea: the Underworld! *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants* is based on the TV series created by the late Stephen Hillenburg. Franchise veteran Derek Drymon directs from a screenplay by Pam Brady and Matt Lieberman, and a story by Marc Ceccarelli, Kaz and Brady.

As usual, it stars Tom Kenny as SpongeBob, Clancy Brown as Mr. Krabs, Rodger Bumpass as Squidward, Bill Fagerbakke as Patrick Star, Carolyn Lawrence as Sandy Cheeks and Mr. Lawrence as Plankton. It also stars Mark Hamill as the Flying Dutchman, George Lopez, Ice Spice, Arturo Castro, Sherry Cola and Regina Hall.

For director Drymon, *Search for SquarePants* was a welcome return to Bikini Bottom after a few years away working for DreamWorks Animation, Illumination and Sony Pictures Animation, where he helmed *Hotel Transylvania 4*. But Drymon's connection to SpongeBob goes back to before it was even a show, when he worked with *series* creator Hillenburg on *Rocko's Modern Life* in the mid-1990s. He also worked extensively on *SpongeBob Comics*, which ran from 2011 to 2018.

"There was a while where I was like, 'I'm done with SpongeBob,'" Drymon says. "But then … as time went on, I kind of missed those guys, missed the characters."

Just Like Old Times

When schedules finally aligned, the time was right for Drymon to return and direct the new feature. "My agent said, they're thinking about doing a new movie, and would you be interested? And I was like, 'Yeah, I would love it,'" he says.

The feature was first developed as a streaming project starring Mr. Krabs, and already included the Flying Dutchman and the journey to the Underworld, when Drymon came on board to work with long-running exec producers and showrunners Marc Ceccarelli and Vince Waller on the script. Their first draft was good enough to convince the studio to turn it into a theatrical feature with SpongeBob himself as the star.

"That's when it had a lot of changes," Drymon says. "We brought in some new writers, and I helped fashion the story from there, but the core of the story was always there."

Head of story Mark O'Hare, another veteran of the show, says the movie's story is exciting because it takes SpongeBob to a new place, and Hamill's Flying Dutchman was a "grand character." But the real challenge was to make a *SpongeBob* movie using 3D animation that still felt like the 2D characters and world everyone knows and loves.

"Every movie is different, and this one is very specific in the way it needs to work … You shoot it from one side, it looks amazing and hilarious. You just move the camera like 30 degrees either side, and it looks like a big mess."
HEAD OF STORY MARK O'HARE

"In that sense, it's very familiar to me, but it's a challenge … to bring that to the stuff into the 3D world without sacrificing what we love about SpongeBob," O'Hare says.

O'Hare says the story team developed a visual palette inspired by animation and by such disparate live-action influences as Sam Raimi's films, the Coen brothers, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies and Phil Joanou's 1987 cult comedy *Three O'Clock High*.

"We're making fun of these movies but also honoring them," O'Hare says. "The contrast between SpongeBob's world and those dynamic 3D cinematic styles is a big part of the fun."

Kent Seki served as head of cinematography early in production before handing off the job to Tom Bruno Jr. (on his way to directing the new short *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* short, which screens with the movie). Seki says he worked with Drymon to develop the movie's look and shooting style, drawing on *Pirates* and *Three O'Clock High*. "We took those two films and applied them to SpongeBob as reference," he says. "And we created a document, a sort of video documentation, as well as written documentation, of what to do there. And that was done remotely with Tom Bruno Jr., and then, when he came on, he took it and ran with it."

Seki says SpongeBob is appealing because of his innocence. "He is not a cynical character in the least bit, and I think there's something very appealing about that."

Drymon says he tried not to think too much about what works and does not work in 3D versus 2D animation and instead approached the story from a creative perspective, relying on collaborators to help solve problems along the way.

For example, Wes Mandell, head of character animation, told Drymon that the two types of animation are almost opposites. "He said, 'If it's easy in 2D, it's really hard in CG, and if it's easy in CG, it's impossible in 2D,'" Drymon says.

"Every movie is different, and this one is very specific in the way it needs to work," O'Hare says. Getting the rigs set up required a lot of work and specialized tools to achieve the right effect. "You shoot it from one side, it looks amazing and hilarious," O'Hare says. "You just move the camera like 30 degrees either side, and it looks like a big mess."

As always, one challenge of making a *SpongeBob* feature is that the character was designed for short-form content.

"I remember, even when we did the first movie, Steve [Hillenburg] was really racking his brain, because the characters just worked in 11 minutes," Drymon says. "How do you sustain 80 or 90 minutes?"

The other challenge was that the nature of the franchise resists the traditional movie arc, in which characters evolve over the course of the story. "On *SpongeBob*, you've

Absorbent Terror of the Seven Seas: In the new movie, SpongeBob (Tom Kenny) tries to prove his bravery to Mr. Krabs and travels to the deepest parts of the ocean to follow the Flying Dutchman (Mark Hamill).

got to leave the character how you found him, you know?" Drymon says. "How do you bring this character the audience knows and loves and — you don't want to change them — but you want to give them some significant movement. You can dive deeper into the emotions with the characters, and you can kind of play around with having them feel something a little deeper than you would want to do in the 11-minute versions. And that's always fun, to see the characters have some real emotions."

One example is with set design. "Like in the Krusty Krab, some shots make it feel gigantic, while others are very intimate and close — doors move everywhere, spaces stretch out," Drymon says. "That's the style of the show, and the audience probably won't realize it, but it would feel wrong if we didn't do it."

Live action has appeared in *SpongeBob* movies before, but it was a new challenge for Drymon. While he originally planned to hire someone with live-action experience to direct those sequences, Drymon says producer Lisa Stewart encouraged him to tackle them himself.

"Everybody has their own SpongeBob experience — they remember seeing an episode at a certain age, with family or during a particular moment in their life. As an artist, it's pretty rare to have that connection."
DIRECTOR DEREK DRYMON

That also translates into the movie's visual aspect, allowing the filmmakers to heighten the danger and find moments of jeopardy that are more theatrical. "You don't want to completely break out of our visual style that's established in the show, but just kind of tweaking the camera a little bit, lowering it a little bit — subtle things that we wouldn't normally do in the show — we can just do little tweaks like that and it really feels like something different," Drymon says.

"It was like doing an animated movie, but all at one time," he says. "In animation, you orchestrate in pieces; in live action, it's everyone working together, and you have a take."

Timeless Chuckles

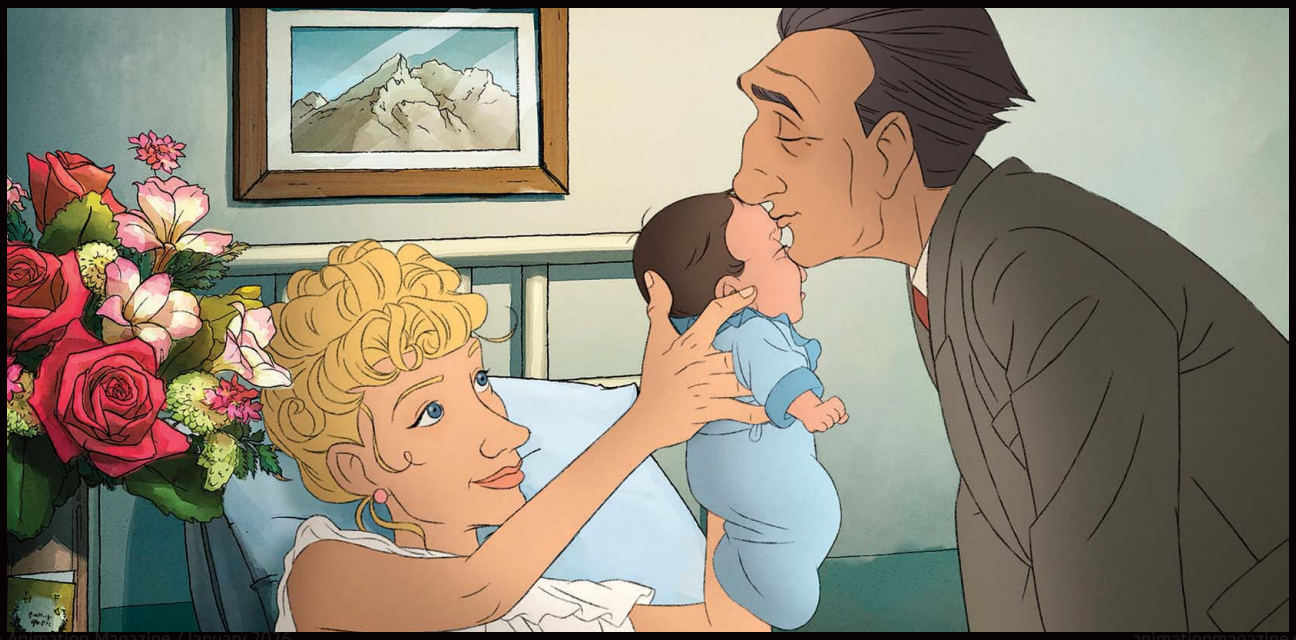
Asked why *SpongeBob* continues to thrive, O'Hare points to the show's ageless sense of humor. "Steve always wanted timelessness," he says. "Everyone who's ever worked on *SpongeBob* agrees — we want it to feel universal, not trendy."

He's particularly proud of the film's dense comedy and big, theatrical moments. "There are jokes within jokes within jokes," he says. "That's what *SpongeBob* is — and why you can watch it multiple times and still find something new.

"Working on this movie really felt like coming home," O'Hare adds. "I just love it when people get excited to see SpongeBob again. This one couldn't have come out better."

Drymon agrees. After 25 years, SpongeBob has become more than a cartoon character, with kids who watched the first seasons now old enough to be watching with their own kids. "Everybody has their own experience — they remember seeing an episode at a certain age, with family, or during a particular moment in their life. As an artist, it's pretty rare to have that connection." ■

Paramount released *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants* in theaters on Dec. 19.



Drawn to a Cinematic Life

Oscar-nominated French auteur Sylvain Chomet discusses his masterful new animated feature A Magnificent Life, a biopic of author and filmmaker Marcel Pagnol.

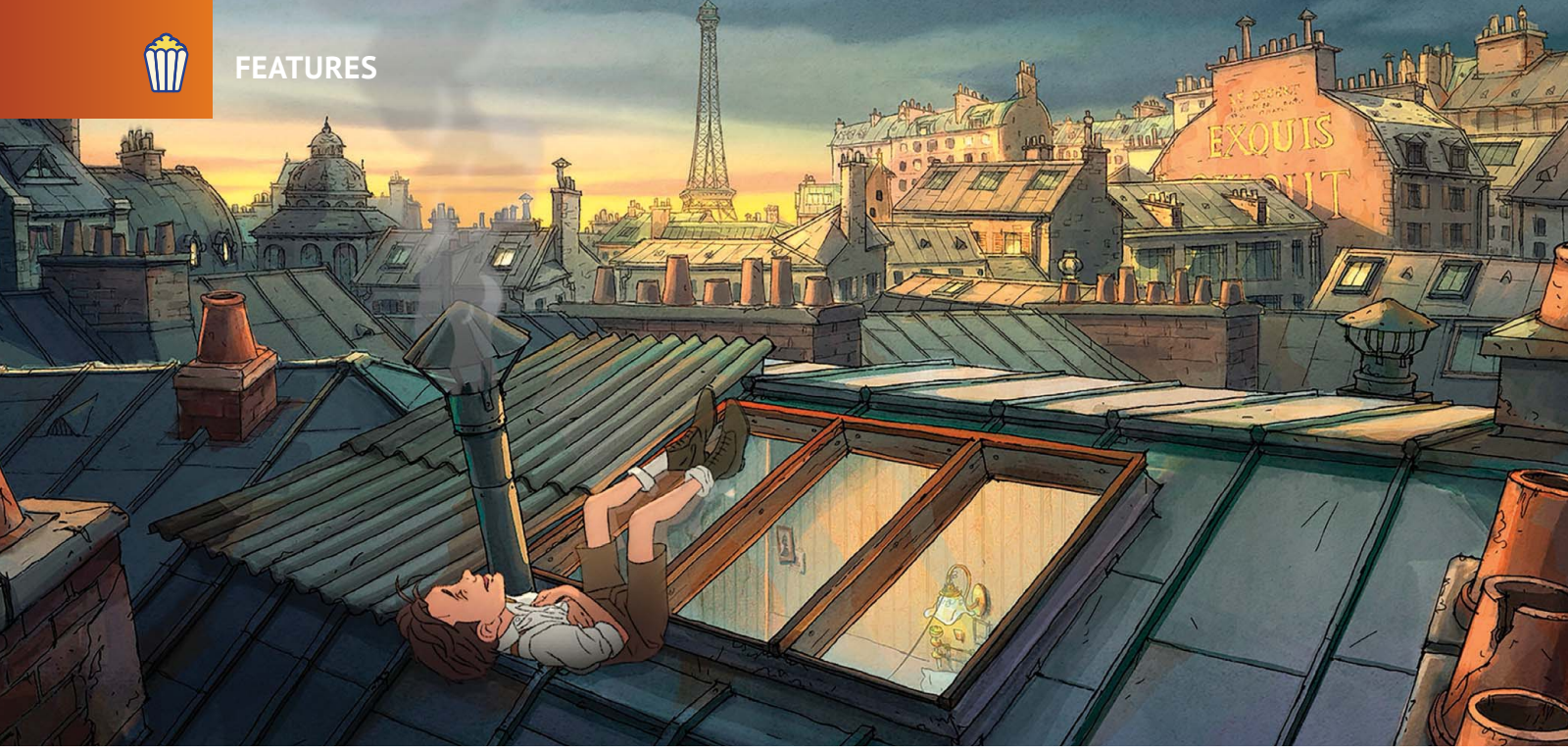
There is enough material in the life of the great French novelist, playwright and filmmaker Marcel Pagnol (1895-1974) to fill an ambitious miniseries. Luckily, the man in charge of bringing Pagnol's biography to animated life is none other than celebrated auteur Sylvain Chomet, whose golden touch was revealed in two of the most original and celebrated films of the 21st century — *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003) and *The Illusionist* (2010).

Chomet's new feature *A Magnificent Life* (original title: *Marcel et Monsieur Pagnol*) charts the life and times of Pagnol, visiting him first when he is 60 and looking back at his beginnings after a magazine editor commissions a weekly column about his boyhood in Provence. The meticulously crafted 2D feature premiered at Cannes, was nominated for a Cristal at Annecy in June and had a limited U.S. release last month (with a wider release planned for February). *Animation Magazine* had the opportunity to speak with two-time Oscar-nominated writer-director via Zoom recently:

Congrats on the recent release of your wonderful new movie. Why did you decide to tell the life story of Pagnol as your follow-up to *The Illusionist*, which was based on a script by another French movie icon, Jacques Tati?

Sylvain Chomet: My relationship with Pagnol goes back to when I was 10 years old. At school, reading his books was part of the curriculum, especially the one about his childhood. At that time, it was very painful for me to read, and we realized later that I had a problem with my eyes. However, I loved the book about the young Marcel growing up in the hills of Marseille. I read that book and all the others from beginning to end, because the kid in the book was exactly the same age as I was, but he was very exotic to me, because I lived in the north of France. When I got older, I realized that he was also making movies and writing plays, and I made the connection between

By Ramin Zahed



that boy and the filmmaker.

As it turns out, Marcel's grandson actually approached me to work on a classic live-action documentary about Pagnol's life with elements of animation sprinkled in it. Initially, I thought it would be very boring as a live-action project. It would be a writer's life story and would be a guy in his office with a cat on his lap, just writing. With animation, we were able to explore all the things that he achieved in his life, as an inventor of new movie technologies, as an explorer, as someone who witnessed the transition of silent movies to talkies. Just like Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator*, you don't have to really be familiar with him to enjoy it because his life is quite fascinating on its own.

We all know how long it takes to produce an animated film these days. When did you begin work on the movie?

Pagnol's grandson Nicolas contacted me about eight years ago. At the time, I told him I would prefer to do a very traditional documentary. I wasn't keen on using animation in a live-action project. I don't think it works for me. He asked me to produce at least one scene between Marcel Pagnol and one of his actors. As we were trying to finance the project, everyone seemed to be more interested in a fully animated project as well. I believe telling someone's real-life story in animation has rarely been done before. I rewrote the project with all the knowledge that I had acquired about his life and opted for something more intimate and personal about this man's fascinating biography. The initial plan began about eight years ago, and I wrote the documentary. Then, I created a pilot/teaser for the film in Normandy. We really began work on the storyboards four years ago. I spent a year and a half on the storyboards by myself, and then we began production, which lasted about two and a half years.

Sylvain Chomet

This is your first animated feature done completely digitally. Can you talk about the different technologies used on the movie?

Yes. When I began my career, the first thing I worked on was the short *The Old Lady and the Pigeons* (1997), which was done the same way Disney was producing its animated projects. We used a rostrum camera, celluloid, pen and ink, paper! Bit by bits, our tools became more sophisticated. On *Triplets of Belleville*, we started to use Photoshop to do the backgrounds, but it was still animated on paper. But the coloring was done with tools that were available at that time, and the same thing with *The Illusionist*. On *A Magnificent Life*, we used Cintiq tablets, but [we're] still using our hands!

Every single drawing has been drawn by hand. It's just an incredibly intelligent pencil that lets you do 100 times more than a piece of wood with a graphite tip! Everyone speaks the same language. I remember on *Triplets*, we had to send the actual paper frames over to a remote place in China via DHL, and sometimes things would come back completely destroyed! Today, everything is so much easier using the internet. I wanted to use Photoshop to do the storyboard, and for the backgrounds and everything else, I preferred TVPaint. I think it's more intuitive, but other people on the team wanted to work with Toon Boom. My next project will be done in TVPaint.

Fans of *Triplets of Belleville* will be very happy to find out about your next project!

Yes, we are returning to some of the original characters from that movie. It will have no dialog. It will be just music and madness. It's based on a script I wrote at the same time as the first movie, which was like 24 years ago. The three tall ladies, the triplets, are featured in it, but there will be new characters. We won't have cyclists or a dog in this movie, but there's a cat. I managed to make her the most disgusting cat you can imagine! And, yes, there are also aliens. It is quite a crazy movie. It's set in the late '50s and early '60s, during the era of the space race. It's a complex story, but

Portrait of an Artist: Sylvain Chomet's first new feature since *The Illusionist* captures the life and times of French cultural icon, novelist, playwright and filmmaker Marcel Pagnol.

everything is explained without dialogue, just the action in the scene and music!

What was the most challenging aspect of bringing such a major figure in French literature and cinema into the world of animation?
It was very important to me for things to be plausible and feel real. I didn't want to make it realistic, but I also couldn't go into this caricature mode. We were dealing with real people, and they still have families who remember them, so it needed to feel like the real characters. But it's still a movie, and I think it worked out well, because audiences seem to really get into the story. Our story begins in 1910 and ends in 1970 when Pagnol dies. Back then, everything changed quickly every five years. We have new inventions, new cars and clothes. People used to really dress up during those days and put on suits and hats, and fashion changed very quickly. That was also difficult to do, because you need to show the passing of the years accurately. We also had to show our main characters aging, but in a very subtle way.

What are you proudest of, now that the movie has opened in France and some other territories?
What I find quite touching is that people are really, really moved by the movie. I have presented the movie in several places, and I noticed that people were in tears. It's amazing because audiences forget the fact that it's an animated movie after the first couple of minutes and are touched by this man's life story. I am so pleased that we can tell any story in animation. In [live-action] biopics, you always have the problem of the actor playing the character not quite resembling the part. We never have that problem in animation!

What do you hope English-speaking audiences take away from Pagnol's life story?
I hope they'll realize what an amazing era he lived in, in terms of all the inventions. These days, we're just improving computers and their abilities. We're not really creating new things that are life-changing. During Pagnol's time, we invented cinema, cars, planes, telephones, radio, records, television, talking pictures, all within three decades. Pagnol was born a few years after the Lumières' first film was shown in 1895.

I also wanted to show how difficult it is to be a creator. Pagnol is famous for being one of the greatest French writers of all time. Yet he also doubted himself a lot, and he needed people around him. I think the movie says a lot about the creative process. It also reflects the history of cinema. Pagnol brought beautifully written dialog to cinema and inspired so many people. He took the camera outside the studios and into the countryside. He experimented by hiding the camera in a car and driving down a very busy street. I want everyone to know what an amazing life he had, as well as how wonderful his wife was. Of course, you don't have to know anything about Pagnol and his books and movies to enjoy our film, because it reflects universal life experiences and human emotions through the magic of animation. ■

***A Magnificent Life* was produced by What the Prod, Mediawan, Picture Box and Bidibul Productions and co-produced by Walking the Dog. Sony Pictures Classics released the film in select theaters in October and will bring it back in February.**

A FAMILY AFFAIR

BROTHERS SETH AND PETE SCRIVER'S WILD, HAND-DRAWN DOCUMENTARY ENDLESS COOKIE COUNTERS STEREOTYPES OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

By Jennifer Wolfe

Few animated documentaries dig into family history with the mix of candor and surrealism driving *Endless Cookie*. Directed by half-brothers Seth and Pete Scriver — one white and one Indigenous — the film assembles years of conversations, memories and real-life interruptions into a family portrait that's both intimate and unexpectedly expansive. Their approach to animated nonfiction is loose, associative and deliberately handmade, a style that mirrors the humor, identity and creative friction that shape their lives between Toronto's bustling Kensington Market and the remote Shamattawa First Nation in Northern Manitoba.

Premiering at Sundance in January, *Endless Cookie* has had a remarkable festival run — picking up awards at Sitges, Leipzig and Annecy — and arrived in the U.S. via Obscured Releasing on Dec. 5.

Kitchen Table Stories

The project began with something simple: Pete telling stories. "Family conversations around the kitchen table," he says over Zoom from Shamattawa, describing the everyday rhythm that first drew Seth to record their talks. What emerged from those early sessions was the texture of daily life itself: stories about family, work, seasons, jokes, frustrations — all the moments that aren't usually depicted in representations of First Nations communities.

One story recounts the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) reacting with what the brothers describe as typical hysteria

Shamattawan Story: Two half-brothers, one Indigenous and one white, embark on a journey from their remote home in Shamattawa to the urban landscape of the 1980s in Seth and Pete Scriver's acclaimed animated documentary *Endless Cookie*.

to such ordinary events as a grandmother dressing a caribou for meat, with the officers assuming that a trail of blood-stained snow could only signal an active crime scene.

"There's never a happy story about Shamattawa," says Pete, explaining how most of the information that comes out of the region is generated by the RCMP. In contrast, he says, with his characteristic chuckle, "Where I come from, most of the people aren't serious about anything."

Traveling in Europe, Seth found himself using Pete's stories to debunk common myths about Canada. "People would come up to us and be like, 'Oh, you're from Canada? Oh, Canada. Oh, the model citizen of the world. Oh, they're so nice to their Native people. Oh, they're so nice to the environment,' saying all these things which were kind of not very true."

For his next project, he thought, "I should definitely get Pete to tell his own stories." A chance psychic consultation would later push him to contact producers Daniel Bekerman and Chris Yurkovich, setting the film's long production process in motion.

Finding Structure in Chaos

Endless Cookie documents the difficulty of recording Pete's stories in a tiny four-bedroom house crowded with eight kids, extended family and more than a dozen dogs constantly weaving in and out of the main room. Early on, Seth used grant money to fly north — trips he now freely admits were mainly "to go up and hang out with Pete and all the kids … build a teepee and whatever … and just be around and visit."

The trips became too costly to sustain ("It's really expensive to get up there," he says), and only then did Seth realize he could simply mail a tape recorder north. Even that solution came with its own chaos: follow-up lines were constantly needed, Pete sometimes forgot to name who he was talking about and the household noise became an unavoidable part of the soundscape, including Ada Scriver — a family member who contributed to a song and assisted with ADR (Automated Dialog Replacement) — trying to quiet the kids in the background. At one point, Pete and Ada discovered that all the files they'd uploaded were empty because the recorder hadn't actually been rolling — a mishap that, like much of the production itself, ended up shaping the film's loose, handmade rhythm.

In the end, the interruptions became part of the film's structure rather than a problem to fix. Seth and Pete never managed a clean recording session, and the detours — kids calling out, dogs crossing the room, neighbors dropping by — kept overrunning whatever story Pete was trying to tell. Instead of cutting around the chaos, Seth embraced it, realizing that the constant drift was the point: Every conversation slid into another,

every anecdote sparked someone else's memory. The chain never quite returns to where it started, giving the film its looping, open-ended rhythm.

Scriver's first animated feature, *Asphalt Watches* (2013), which he directed with Shayne Ehman, follows the duo's hitchhiking trek across Canada while dodging creepy ex-convicts and rapping with dogs, all set to a deep, bassy synth.

Music is just as central to *Endless Cookie*, which features an eclectic 28-song lineup consisting of esoteric old-school Canadian punk rock. Composer and sound designer Andrew Zukerman provides the film's sonic backbone, but most of the soundtrack draws from Seth's own circles — bands he's played in, artists he's collaborated with for years and musicians he counts as close friends.

"We are just kind of lucky that we know so many talented musicians who let us use their stuff," Seth says, recalling how friends freely offered their entire catalogs for the film. "It's also the beauty of spending nine years to make something. Eventually you run into someone that has some good tunes."

Family member Chris Scriver performed the traditional Native drumming and singing in the film, and Seth contributed cues himself, even whistling Chopin's "Funeral March" for one sequence. The result feels as handmade as the animation: Songs slide in and out like memories, punctuating jokes or tangents with the same spontaneous energy that defines the film's visual rhythm.

Shaping the Visuals

If the stories in *Endless Cookie* drift and loop in unexpected directions, the visuals dive straight into lo-fi psychedelia. Seth animated the film largely on his own over the course of eight years, drawing in a loose, hand-built style that leans into distortion and exaggeration. Early on, he worked using Flash 8 on an aging tablet before eventually upgrading to a Wacom Cintiq and Adobe Animate, but the tools mattered less than the approach: quick, associative drawings that slip between memory, metaphor and lived detail.

Character design followed the same logic. Seth sketched people through gestures, moods and sometimes objects that felt tied to who they were. The results can appear surreal on screen, yet when he showed early designs to relatives, they instantly recognized themselves and each other. That instinctive approach also extends to less obvious figures, including the film's funder, Telefilm Canada, which Seth renders as a full-fledged character — a wry nod to the agency's role in the project and a way of pulling the film's funding realities into its visual universe.

A small team helped fill out the world — assistant animator Julian Gallese, additional animators Kristin ("Cookie") and Simone ("Simminy") Scriver, and graphic artist Diana Vandermeulen — but the production remained intentionally improvised. Sequences grew or contracted depending on the flow of the stories, and whole sections were reworked or cut, including roughly 30 minutes of finished animation that didn't make the one-hour-and-37-minute final film.

"We're working with family and that makes it a little more precious. If it wasn't so personal, if it wasn't all these people we love, I wouldn't have spent so much time in this crazy way."
DIRECTOR SETH SCRIVER

"The movie was actually two hours long, fully animated, and we edited out half an hour," Seth reveals, describing how editor Sydney Cowper trimmed meandering sequences to help tighten the narrative. "It was little distractions that maybe were too distracting, little vignettes," he says. The idea of cutting so much material was "like a nightmare," but once they watched the new cut, "It was like, 'Oh, yeah, this is actually really good. Shorter is better.'

"I don't know if I would ever do that again," he allows. "It was kind of crazy, but it's nice that we did it this way. We're working with family and that makes it a little more precious. If it wasn't so personal, if it wasn't all these people we love, I wouldn't have spent so much time in this crazy way." ■

Obscured Releasing opens *Endless Cookie* in select U.S. theaters on Dec. 5.

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HUNTING THE WEREWOLVES OF LIVONIA

Lauris and Raitis Abele get to the heart of their surreal animated feature *Dog of God*.

By Jeff Spry

For those who earnestly believe that modern animation has become too tame, or whose tastes run toward the wilder, more exotic shades of life, a new animated feature out of Latvia just might be something to seriously consider when its theatrical release arrives in 2026.

Dog of God is certainly not for the squeamish or for gentle souls of a delicate architecture: Using throwback rotoscoping techniques, the film offers overt sexuality, twisted humor and dark, dreamlike folklore that cuts deep into the macabre account of a famous 17th century werewolf trial. Latvian filmmaking brothers Lauris and Raitis Abele conceived their historical horror show as a family affair, with the third sibling, Marcis Abele, serving as *Dog of God*'s cinematographer. Their nightmarish fable has been submitted for 2026 Academy Award consideration in the Best International Feature category and is currently screening at various film festivals.

Set during the Middle Ages, *Dog of God* is a crazy concoction of witchcraft, sorcery and paganism that often defies strict interpretations — and that's exactly what gives this visionary project a distinct independent flair, even during its most daring and startlingly mystical moments.

Madness of the Middles Ages

"It was supposed to be a live-action film first, not animation," Raitis tells *Animation Magazine*. "We did a 2018 documentary that's on Tubi called *Baltic Tribes*, about the lost pagans of Europe. It's a science reenactment movie about paganism in Europe in the 13th century of the Northern Crusades and tells how we were Christianized. We used just enough animation to tell the stories we cannot film because of the budget. Then we were approached by a screenwriter who had a script and knew some guys locally who could do it. When he saw our film he said, 'You're the only ones I trust the script to. Go with it!' If anyone in our audience is interested in werewolves, they can Google *Hound of God*. There's a link to the Thiess of Kaltenbrun, which is 60 kilometers from our capital city. It's one of the most well-documented werewolf court cases ever recorded."

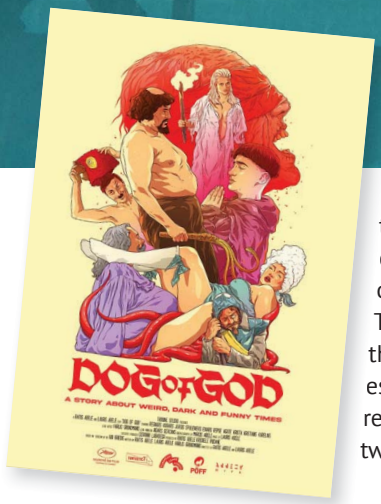
Raitis Abele

The gothic screen story, centered on a woman accused of witchcraft in a 17th century Swedish Livonian village, was compiled from several sources, including an obscure American author who penned a nonfiction werewolf release back in 1992 that was ripe for the plucking.

"There's a book by Adam Douglas called *The Beast Within*," Raitis explains. "Anyone who likes werewolves will enjoy it. It takes on different aspects of the werewolf phenomenon. He looks scientifically throughout history [at] how the myth of werewolves evolved. I found this book at the Strand Bookstore in New York, and there's a big passage about Livonian werewolves. Livonia is the place we come from — it was the previous name of the Latvia and Estonia territories.

"Here's this guy writing about our history, something we are not taught in schools," he adds. "There's case after case of how the myth of werewolves in the Eastern and Northern part of Europe is different from Central Europe, France and Switzerland. That myth has been adopted by Hollywood and taken to the next level and spread more widely than the Livonian werewolf myths, [which] have become sort of underground. They're not shape-shifting werewolves but a fertility cult, more as shamans, these weird guys that lived beyond society."

Lauris recalls when they were approached by Ivo Briedis, the scriptwriter, who told them the little-known story about the most famous



A Spellbinding Experience: Lauris and Raitis Abele's *Dog of God* uses rotoscoped animation to tell the story of a woman accused of witchcraft in a 17th century Swedish Livonian village.

werewolf trial in Northern Europe.

"That was the initial idea," he says. "But when we decided to make it into animation, the concept shifted because we understood it couldn't just be an animated trial movie. It would be very boring. There's the courtroom trial genre, but for animation it should be way more diverse and trippy. At that point, we started looking into fairy tales and decided that this will be an adult fairy tale. The story became a 17th century fairy tale that could still resonate with people today. Since it's for adults, it basically has no boundaries. Here in the Baltics, we have this type of humor when we love not laughing. It's not the same British dark humor, but we just sometimes find the absurdity of something that we can laugh about on the inside."

"When we decided to make it into animation, the concept shifted. We wanted it to be way more diverse and trippy, so the story became a 17th century fairy tale that could still resonate with people today."
DIRECTOR LAURIS ABELE

For reference, Lauris points to a 2017 black-and-white Estonian fantasy-horror film from director Rainer Sarnet titled *November* that exhibits that same sense of restrained esoteric humor.

"It's also this weird Baltic humor, which at some point is actually sad and sometimes spooky. Right now, when everyone celebrates Halloween, we would celebrate the Day of the Dead. It's not scary. We put some vegetables or meats out and celebrate the absurdity of the holiday. Director Terry Gilliam can go into that territory a little bit, especially with *Tideland*, regarding that sort of dark, twisted humor."

The rotoscoping process of animating over live-action scenes has been around for decades, most notably in Ralph Bakshi's *Fire and Ice* and the *Heavy Metal* movies.

"Basically, the short answer is that Lauris and I have directed art-house films and we come from narrative live-action films," Raitis says about the rotoscoping decision. "We started to develop *Dog of God* as live action. But then I was asked by Latvian friends of ours that did the animated film *Flow*, that won the [animated feature] Oscar last year. I worked with them for the first year and helped to assemble a team of animators for the director. So I came back to Lauris and said, 'Hey, maybe let's do *Dog of God* as animation.'"

At first, since Lauris is the eldest brother, he said no. "Animation was something that was totally off the table, but then I asked our friend to make sketches, and he did some first tests as to how it would look as rotoscope animation. Lauris said, 'Wow, I see that it's possible.' So rotoscoping was something in between what we know. We know how to film and work with actors. We know how to help set up live-action scenes. But we wanted to go in a direction that we don't know, the universes that we could create by the help of Harijs Grundmanis' art and this visual world. Respect for dark '80s fantasy animation was a big influence. A lot of it is something that happens in our minds, but graphically, it's not so graphic."

Lead animation duties were mainly performed by animation director Grundmanis and key animator Aigars Gercans, with a haunting immersive score composed by Lauris Abele himself.

Sounds of Horror

"We thought the sound should be powerful but should be like psychological realism," Raitis adds. "Sound that was entertaining. If it's thunder, it can rumble. If we're in hell, then the sand and the winds need to be overwhelming. We went with different stylistics. Viewers need to be immersed in this world. There's nothing connected to realism. Except there's no ADR [automated dialog replacement]; all sound was recorded on set. When actors speak or grunt, we hope it makes the animation feel alive."

In true maverick style, the ambitious Abele brothers are now surfing their film's overwhelming award season promotional wave.

"Hopefully, we can represent Latvian animation like *Flow*," they conclude. "We got a lot of help from Latvian artists and Latvian students because we didn't have much budget. It was very good for us, and it was good for them as well, as they all had a very good experience." ■

***Dog of God* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in June. Cartuna will release the film in select U.S. theaters in 2026.**

COMING ATTRACTIONS

26 PICS IN THE MIX IN '26

With only a few more weeks left in 2025, we thought it would be a good idea to take a look at some of the big movies that are waiting patiently to be discovered by animation fans worldwide next year. **Here are 26 titles coming to theaters or premiering on streamers in 2026.**

Charlie the Wonderdog

This charming original movie from director Shea Wageman follows a canine superhero voiced by Owen Wilson who gains magical powers when he's abducted by aliens. ***ICON Creative Studio, Viva Pictures; Jan. 16***

Meikyū no Shiori (Labyrinth)

A young girl in Yokohama finds herself trapped in an alternate version of her world inside her smartphone in this original anime directed by Shoji Kawamori and produced by Sanzigen. ***Gaga, Japan: Jan. 1***

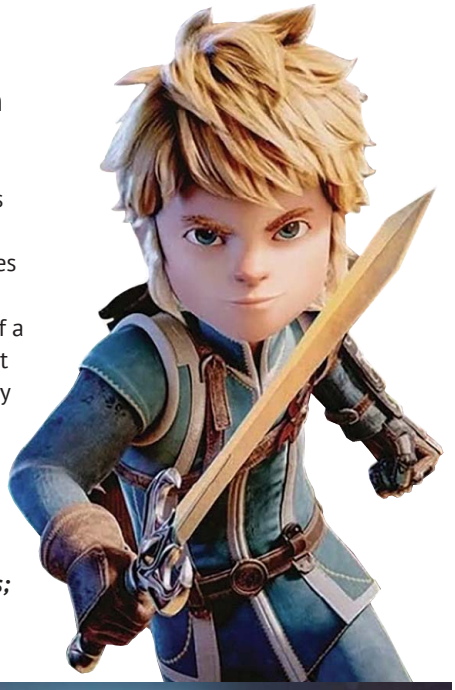
All You Need Is Kill

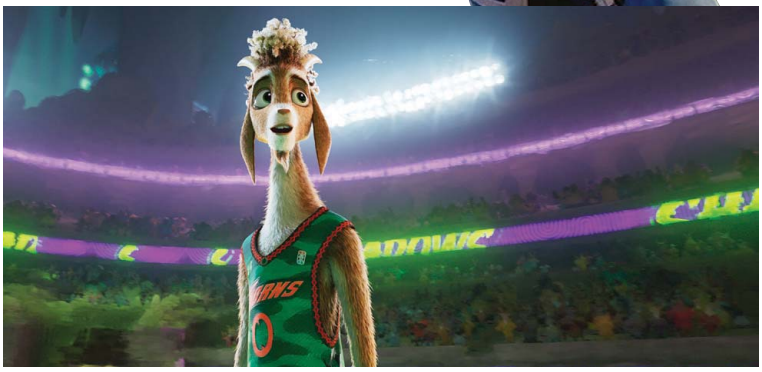
This eagerly anticipated adaptation of Hiroshi Sakurazaka's sci-fi novel centers on a woman who is caught in a time loop after dying in an alien plant's violent outburst, making her relive the same day. The book also inspired Doug Liman's 2014 live-action film *Edge of Tomorrow* starring Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt. The new anime is directed by Kenichiro Akimoto and produced by Studio 4°C. ***Japan: Jan. 9; GKIDS, Jan. 16***

Cosmic Princess Kaguya!

Shingo Yamashita's upcoming film is based on the monogatari *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* a.k.a. *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* and features character designs by Hechima and Akihiro Nagae. The story centers on a Moon princess who is discovered as a baby inside the stalk of a blowing bamboo plant. ***Studio Colorido, Studio Chromato, Twin Engine, Netflix; Jan. 22***

Les Légendaires - Le Film
(The Legendaries: The Movie)
Based on Patrick Sobral's popular comic-book series, this CG-animated French feature follows the fantastic adventures of five legendary heroes who turn into children as a result of a curse and must face off against a powerful sorcerer. Directed by Guillaume Ivernel (*Leap!*), with the voices of Roman Doduik, Esthele Dumand and Lucien Jean-Baptiste.
Pan-Europeanne, Belvision, Maybe Movies, Studio 2 Minutes; France: Jan. 28



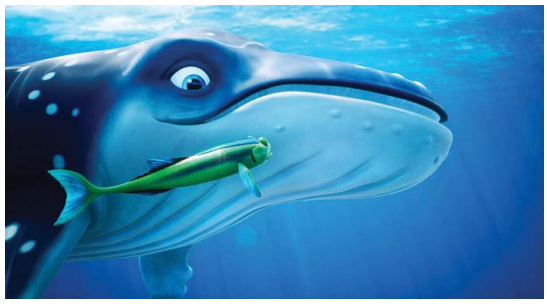


GOAT
A small goat who dreams of being a pro player of "roarball," a high-intensity, co-ed, full-contact sport derived from basketball, gets a once-in-a-lifetime shot to join the game dominated by the fastest and fiercest animals in the world. Directed by *Bob's Burgers* veteran Tyree Dillihay and Adam Rosette, and featuring the voices of David Harbour, Patton Oswalt, Aaron Pierre, Gabrielle Union, Nick Kroll, Caleb McLaughlin, Jenifer Lewis, Sherry Cola, Jennifer Hudson, JellyRoll and Stephen Curry. ***Sony Pictures Animation, Feb. 13***

A New Dawn
Anime artist Yoshitishi Shinomiya's directing debut is inspired by the changing Japanese landscape after the devastating 2011 earthquake. It centers on a young boy who is living in an abandoned fireworks factory who devises a plan to move on with his life after his father's disappearance. ***Asmic Ace/Miyu Productions, Japan: March 6***

Paris Ni Saku Étoile L'étoile de Paris en Fleur
Set in Paris in the early 1900s, this anime directed by Gorō Taniguchi (*One Piece Film: Red*) is about two young Japanese girls, Fujiko and Chizuro, who dream of becoming a painter and a ballerina, respectively. ***Arvo Animation, Japan: March 13***

Doraemon the Movie: Nobita and the New Castle of the Undersea Devil.
Believe it or not, this 45th Doraemon feature film is a remake of a 1983 release. Directed by Testuo Yajima, it finds the popular robotic cat created by Fujiko Fujio exploring a deep-sea world full of unexpected mysteries and characters. ***Toho, Shin-Ei Animation, Japan: Feb 27***



The Last Whale Singer
A self-doubting teenage humpback whale must fight a monstrous leviathan and discover his own song in this German-Czech-Canadian feature directed by Reza Memari.
Telescope, PFX, La Boîte à Fanny; Germany: Feb. 12

Asterix: The Kingdom of Nubia

Goscinny and Uderzo's famous comic-book hero returns for another CG-animated adventure. Directed by Alexandre Heboyan and featuring the voices of Christian Clavier, Francois-Xavier Demaison and Francois de Brauer, the film finds the heroic Gaul and his loyal companion Obelix on a journey through one of Africa's earlier civilizations. ***M6 Films, Superprod, SNF Films; France: Oct. 14***

Hoppers

A 19-year-old animal lover voiced by Piper Curda uses technology to place her consciousness into a robotic beaver so she can help a group of animals fight against a greedy construction company. Written and directed by Daniel Chong (*We Bare Bears*). With Jon Hamm, Bobby Moynihan, Demetri Martin and Melissa Villaseñor. ***Disney/Pixar, March 6***

The Super Mario Galaxy Movie

This sequel to the 2023 blockbuster, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, is directed by Aaron Horvath and Michael Jelenic. Chris Pratt, Anya Taylor-Joy, Charlie Day, Jack Black, Keegan-Michael Key and Kevin Michael Richardson reprise their roles. ***Universal, Illumination, Nintendo; April 3***

The Angry Birds Movie 3

Director John Rice (*The Angry Birds Movie 2*, *The Simpsons Movie*) is back at the helm for the Rovio/Sega video game property's third cinematic outing, penned by Thurop Van Orman (*The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack*). Voices include Jason Sudeikis, Josh Gad, Danny McBride, Emma Myers, Keke Palmer, Rachel Bloom, Tim Robinson and MrBeast. ***Paramount, Dec. 23***

Toy Story 5

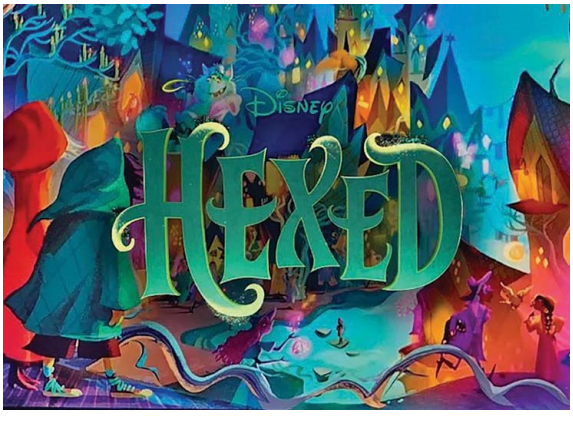
A frog-like tablet named Lilypad (Anna Faris) has become Bonnie's favorite plaything ever since Woody left home to help abandoned toys find their owners in this fifth film featuring Pixar's beloved characters, written and directed by Oscar winner Andrew Stanton. Starring Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Ernie Hudson, Tony Hale and Conan O'Brien. ***Disney/Pixar, June 19***

Minions 3

Onetime Oscar nominee Pierre Coffin, who's no stranger to the *Minions* and *Despicable Me* movies, is back in the director's chair for this third solo outing of the little yellow guys. The threequel is penned by Brian Lynch *Minions (The Secret Life of Pets* movies) and produced by Illumination boss Chris Meledandri and Bill Ryan, executive producer of *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*. ***Universal, Illumination; July 1***

Wildwood

LAIKA's sixth animated feature is based on Colin Meloy and Carson Ellis' book, which follows a young girl as she attempts to save her kidnapped infant brother from the crows, while drawn into a hidden magical forest outside Portland. The dark fantasy-adventure is directed by Travis Knight and written by Chris Butler. Peyton Elizabeth Lee, Jacob Tremblay, Carey Mulligan, Mahershala Ali, Awkwafina, Angela Bassett, Jake Johnson, Charlie Day, Tantoo Cardinal, Tom Waits and Richard E. Grant comprise the voice cast. ***LAIKA, Fourth Quarter***



Hexed

Disney's 65th animated feature, directed by Jason Hand and Josie Trinidad, is an original project about a teenage misfit and his mother who discover that his weirdness is actually hidden magic, transporting them to a world where magic can run free. ***Disney, Nov. 25***

The Cat in the Hat

Dr. Seuss' wild and wacky feline favorite, this time voiced by Bill Hader, comes back to the world of animation. Directed by Alessandro Carloni and Erica Rivinoja, the colorful film features the voices of America Ferrera, Giancarlo Esposito, Matt Berry, Quinta Brunson, Bowen Yang, Tiago Martinez and Tituss Burgess. ***Warner Bros. Pictures Animation, Nov. 6***

Ray Gunn

Brad Bird's long-awaited new animated feature is described as an adult detective film set in an alternate future and follows a gumshoe named Raymond Gunn. "If you mashed up *The Maltese Falcon* with *Buck Rogers*, it might be something like that — but hopefully with a bit more action and funnier," says Bird. ***Netflix/Skydance Animation, Fourth Quarter***

PAW Patrol: The Dino Movie

Director Cal Bunker is back to helm this third feature outing of Spin Master's popular canine heroes created by Keith Chapman. The movie finds Chase, Skye, Marshall, Rubble, Rocky, Zuma, Everest, Liberty and Ryder stranded on a mysterious dinosaur island, where they meet a pup named Rex. The voice cast includes McKenna Grace, Jameela Jamil, Terry Crews, Jennifer Hudson, Snoop Dogg, Paris Hilton and Bill Nye. ***Paramount, Aug. 14***

Coyote vs. Acme

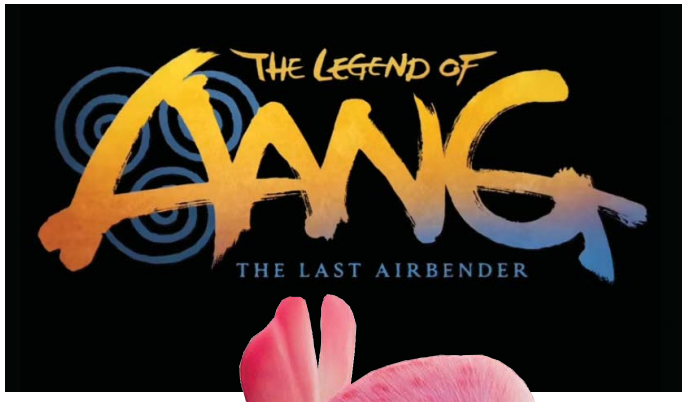
Directed by Dave Green (*TMNT: Out of the Shadows*) and produced by Warner Bros. Pictures Animation, *Coyote vs. Acme* tracks Wile E. Coyote (voiced by Eric Bauza) as he takes legal action against the Acme Corporation for the countless faulty products that have hindered his relentless pursuit of the Road Runner. The cast features Will Forte, John Cena, Candi Milo, Lana Condor, P.J. Byrne and Tone Bell. The film is produced by Chris DeFaria and James Gunn, with a screenplay by Samy Burch. ***Ketchup Entertainment, Aug. 28***

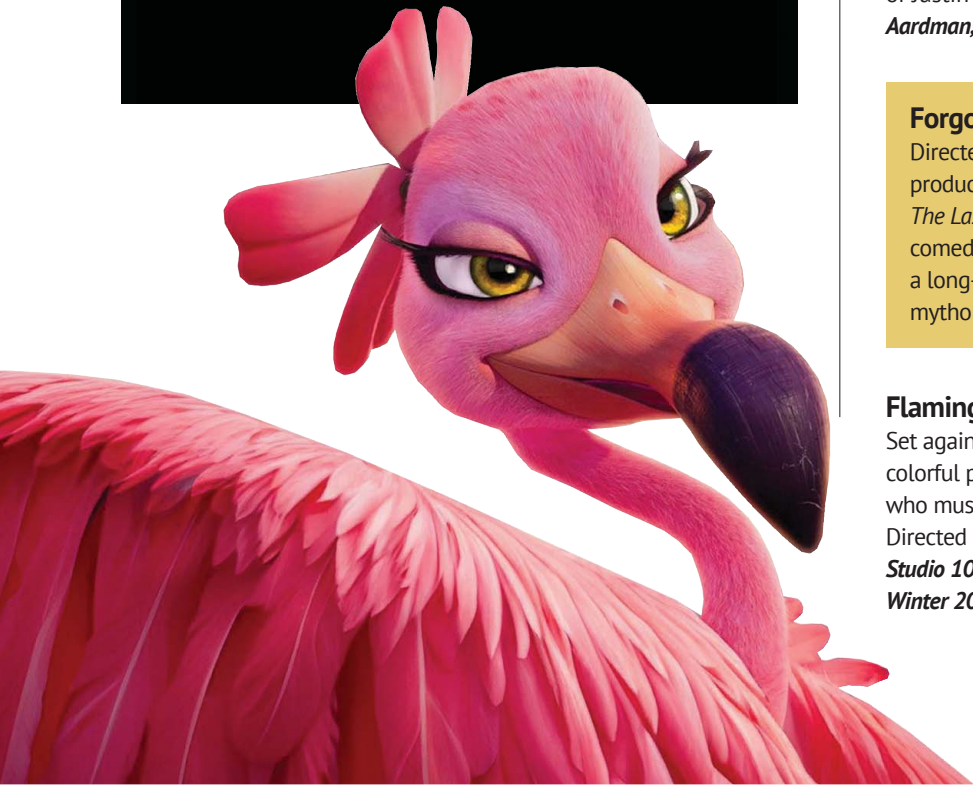
Julián

Directed by Louise Bagnall (the Oscar-nominated *short, Late Afternoon*), this much-anticipated new feature from the team at Kilkenny-based Cartoon Saloon is based on Jessica Love's book, *Julian Is a Mermaid*. It follows *wide-eyed young boy who dreams of being a mermaid through a summer of discovery, imagination and transformation in Brooklyn.* ***Cartoon Saloon, Aircraft Pictures, Melusine; Release date: TBD***

The Legend of Aang: The Last Airbender

In the first animated film based on Nickelodeon's acclaimed series created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, Aang (Eric Nam) is in his mid-20s and facing new challenges as he tries to find hope for the future of his kind in this epic adventure, directed by Lauren Montgomery. With the voices of Dave Bautista, Dionne Quan, Jessica Matten and Steven Yeun. ***Paramount, Oct. 10***





Swapped

Originally titled *Pookoo* and slated for a 2025 release, writer-director Nathan Greno's (*Tangled*) visually stunning buddy comedy/eco-fable centers on a small woodland creature and a majestic bird, two sworn enemies of the Valley that magically trade places and set off on an adventure of a lifetime. ***Netflix/Skydance Animation, TBA***

Shaun the Sheep: The Beast of Mossy Bottom

After the Farmer trashes the flock's beloved pumpkin patch, Shaun turns "mad scientist" to fix the problem, but things spin out of control when a wild beast begins to terrorize the farm in this third cinematic outing for Aardman's wooly hero. Directed by Steven Cox and Matthew Walker, with the voices of Justin Fletcher, John Sparkes and Kate Harbour. ***Aardman, Sky, Studiocanal; October***

Forgotten Island

Directed by Joel Crawford and Januel Mercado and produced by Mark Swift, the team behind *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, this original movie is described as a broad comedy-adventure that transports the film's heroes to a long-forgotten, magical island steeped in Philippine mythology. ***DreamWorks Animation, Universal; Sept. 25***

Flamingo Flamenco

Set against the beautiful backdrop of Andalusia, Spain, this colorful pic follows the adventures of a vivacious flamingo who must overcome personal loss to be able to dance again. Directed by Rob Sprackling and Disney veteran Raúl Garcia. ***Studio 100 International, 3 Doubles Producciones, Viva Kids; Winter 2026***

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KPop Demon Hunters (Image courtesy of Netflix, 2025)

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Colombia Gets More Animated!

The number of animation and VFX projects is on the rise in the beautiful South American destination known for its beauty, biodiversity and vibrant culture.

Berenice y Los Moravitas

Las Vidas de Marie Cuadrada

Tin & Tan

The Colombian animation and VFX sector is experiencing a period of steady and strategic growth, positioning itself as an increasingly competitive industry in Latin America. More than half of the companies in this sector have been operating for over a decade, demonstrating a solid foundation and extensive experience.

María Camila Castellanos, the exec director of PorColombia (the organization in charge of promoting the country's exports, tourism and foreign direct investment) points out, "About 78% of Colombian studios have received national or international recognition, with distinctions such as the India Catalina Awards, Macondo Awards and Steel Pencil Awards at home, and honors from international festivals like MIFA, Pixelatl, and Ventana Sur. This progress is driven by studios that now cover the entire production chain, from preproduction to production and postproduction (2D/3D animation, VFX, compositing, color correction and sound), reflecting an ecosystem that is mature, versatile and creatively ambitious."

María Camila Castellanos

Castellanos says there are many advantage to working with Colombian animation and VFX studios. "These companies combine high technical expertise with artistic innovation, using advanced tools such as Maya, Blender, and Unreal Engine to deliver top-quality results. Their strong storytelling, creative versatility, and adaptability allow them to cater to diverse global markets."

Another key plus is effective communication. Nearly 97.3% of professionals in Colombian studios are proficient in English, followed by French (39.4%) and Portuguese (36.8%), which facilitates seamless collaboration and cross-cultural understanding with international partners.

Efficiency is also a defining feature. Thanks to their creativity, technical skill and experience, 47% of Colombian studios can produce up to 500 seconds of animation per month, which is an impressive reflection of their productivity and capacity.

According to Castellanos, Colombia's animation and VFX studios also show a strong commitment to sustainability. "They promote youth inclusion, social development, gender equality, and environmentally they implement greenhouse gas monitoring, follow the Green Screen Environmental Best Practices Guide, and produce content that promotes ecosystem preservation, even engaging in tree and coral planting initiatives linked to their projects," she notes. "Economically, they prioritize fair wages, stable employment, and educational programs, ensuring responsible and equitable growth."

wKey Players

Colombia continues to expand its community of talented and creative studios. Among the leading players are:

- **Diptongo Media Group**, a multimedia studio with over 16 years of experience producing high-quality audiovisual content, animation and digital productions for global brands. The studio combines creativity, technical excellence and storytelling to deliver impactful projects across advertising, entertainment and social media.
- **Pipeline Studios**, a creative powerhouse focused on developing, producing, and distributing premium content worldwide. Their services cover the full pipeline, from concept and script to 2D/3D animation, hybrid techniques, stop motion, live action, music, postproduction and packaging.
- **Bombillo Amarillo**, renowned for its expertise in 2D and "tradigital" animation, a blend of traditional frame-by-frame and cut-out techniques. The studio also offers creative writing, concept art, character and background design, compositing, visual effects and complete postproduction support.

Several Colombian studios are currently involved in outstanding international and local animation projects that showcase the country's growing creative and technical talent:

- **Dinamita Animación** is developing a beautiful campaign for McDonald's, as well as collaborating with Titmouse on a fun animated series for Duolingo's YouTube channel. They also recently

worked on *Mukira*, an acclaimed feature film directed by Estefanía Piñeres, in collaboration with Bombillo Amarillo. Bombillo Amarillo is also currently co-producing *La Violinista*, an ambitious co-pro between Italy, Singapore, Spain and Colombia, described as a World War II-themed animated feature with a high-level anime aesthetic and production quality.

• **Ikartoons** is also developing several exciting projects, including collaborations with *Sesame Street* and *El Reino Infantil*, the third largest YouTube channel for children worldwide.

Meanwhile, **Team Toon** is focusing on its own IP, *Tuku Toon,* as well as several other impressive projects currently under confidentiality agreements. Lastly, **Insert Coin** has been working with Marvel, producing animation for the *Hot Wheels Marvel* series, an impressive and visually stunning collaboration that highlights the studio's strong artistic capabilities.

• **Folks Colombia** stands as another success story for the country's audiovisual industry, exemplifying how a leading international player has established itself in Colombia. By combining local talent with global production standards, it drives creative employment and skill development.

One of the main challenges facing the sector is that Colombian animation is sometimes undervalued, as it is still considered an emerging industry. As Castellanos explains, "However, thanks to institutional support, international exposure, and growing creative recognition, Colombia's animation and VFX sector is increasingly seen as one of the most promising in Latin America."

Over the last five years, 84% of Colombian studios have exported content, with 87.5% of exports going to the United States. To strengthen their global position, studios are investing in research and development, forming strategic alliances, and pursuing international certifications. These efforts reflect an industry that, while still consolidating, is evolving rapidly and carving out a solid place in both local and international markets.

Omega Maximus

Tax Incentives

The Colombian government makes it easier and more cost-effective for international studios to collaborate with Colombian partners. Through ProColombia, the country offers strong institutional support that helps ensure reliability, quality and international visibility of its animation and audiovisual studios. This includes funding programs and participation in top global markets like MIFA, Pixelatl, MIPCOM, MIP Cancun, Iberseries and Ventana Sur, where international stakeholders can easily connect with vetted Colombian talent.

For U.S. studios, this means working with teams that are already integrated into the global ecosystem, well-prepared, internationally recognized, and supported by the government to promote co-productions, service contracts and long-term partnerships. Additionally, Colombia provides access to business matchmaking forums, trade missions and fiscal incentive programs (such as CINA and Ley 1556) that can make your next production or collaboration in Colombia more financially efficient and logistically seamless.

It is worth mentioning that Colombia offers a range of tax incentives and reimbursements designed to attract investment in the audiovisual, animation and video game sectors. Audiovisual companies can access income tax deductions of up to **165% of the value invested or donated** to Colombian film projects and to creative economy projects endorsed through public calls in areas such as arts, entertainment, design, multimedia content, interactive audiovisual services and publishing.

Additionally, through the **Colombian Film Fund (FFC)**, international productions can obtain a **40% reimbursement** of expenses related to film services and **20% reimbursement** of logistics expenses, including accommodation, food and transport. These benefits also extend to music videos, TV series, web series and promotional videos.

"Colombian animation studios are eager to collaborate on a broad range of projects, including entertainment productions, educational content, advertising, video games, music videos, feature films and animated series, as well as animation for augmented reality environments," says Castellanos. "They are particularly interested in working with producers and distributors in the same industry who can act as service clients or content partners. At the same time, they welcome collaborations with investors from other sectors, such as marketing, toys, food, fashion or education. This openness shows how Colombia's animation sector is ready to build global creative partnerships that expand both artistic and production capabilities."

By 2026, ProColombia's goal is to further strengthen the international reputation of the country's animation and VFX productions. "We aim to consolidate Colombia's position as a key player in the international creative industry, recognized for its originality, professionalism, and technical excellence," says Castellanos. "Moreover, 81% of Colombian studios have expressed interest in receiving foreign investment, particularly through mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures. This reflects a strong commitment to international collaboration, innovation, and sustainable growth, ensuring Colombia's creative sector continues to flourish on the global stage." ■

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Outstanding in Their Field

Director Jeroen Jaspaert takes us behind the scenes of Magic Light Pictures' new Christmas special *The Scarecrows' Wedding*.

By Ramin Zahed

Two scarecrows encounter an unexpected challenge as they prepare for their wedding day in Magic Light Pictures' new holiday special *The Scarecrows' Wedding*. The lovestruck Betty O'Barley and Harry O'Hay (voiced by Jessie Buckley and Domhnall Gleeson) are at the heart of Magic Light's 13th adaptation of picture books written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler. The voice cast also includes Rob Brydon as the perfectly named villain Reginald Rake and Sophie Okonedo as the narrator.

Directed by Samantha Cutler and Jeroen Jaspaert and produced by Barney Goodland and Michael Rose, the special premiered Christmas Day on the BBC in the U.K. Jaspaert, who also directed Magic Light's *The Highway Rat*, tells *Animation Magazine* that he was looking for another Julia Donaldson & Alex Scheffler title that would be a great holiday special. "*The Scarecrows' Wedding* stood out to me, and I adored the characters, both protagonists and its great villain," he says. "So, in 2018 I started exploring story ideas and doing lots of thumbnails."

"We wanted to make a point of the wooden construction underneath the scarecrows' clothes and use the friction and limitation of movement to our advantage. They are articulate, but in a 'less is more' way, it takes them some effort to bend through their knees."
DIRECTOR JEROEN JASPAERT

However, the opportunity arose for him to develop *Pip and Posy* as a preschool series, and Jaspaert took a step back from the specials for a few years. "Magic Light kept developing the story, and Steven Bloomer wrote a beautiful, romantic script, inspired by his own wedding," notes the producer. "It was satisfying to see, without ever having discussed the project, how many of our ideas were overlapping. Samantha Cutler, director of *The Smeds and the Smoos*, was lined up to direct it, but Magic Light was still looking for a co-director. I had just finished the second season of *Pip and Posy* and jumped at the chance because I had some unfinished business with these Scarecrows!"

Hay Fever

The director says he loved diving into the new world of the living and feeling scarecrows, with the unexpected twist that humans don't know they're alive. "We enjoyed exploring what makes scarecrows unique and seeing the farm from their point of view," Jaspaert notes. "It's also a romantic comedy, which I'd never tackled before — at least not since my student film, which revolved around two cow udders falling in love!"

Unlike the book, where the scarecrows are a couple from the start, the adaptation shows how they meet. "Betty is a confident scarecrow who's surprised when the farmer builds her a companion," explains the director. "We then spend the first few minutes seeing how they gradually fall for each other, with comedic incidents. What was great about this book is that it already had quite a cinematic story structure. A strong inciting incident, a point of no return, a dramatic finale where the stakes are raised … it's all in the source material."

The production's scope was quite high-end, and there were many locations and light settings, different types of characters and a big wedding party at the end. "We also have a complex fire sequence; we knew from the start we wanted it to feel part of the set and act like its own character," says Jaspaert. "That was quite a departure from fire we'd had in previous specials, and it caused quite a few sleepless nights keeping track of all that continuity."

Another challenging aspect of the project was making the scarecrows move in a unique way. "In live-action movies, scarecrows often look like flopsy characters," the director points out. "But we wanted to make a point of

Making Hay: *The Scarecrows' Wedding* follows a long line of successful adaptations of Julia Donaldson books by Magic Light Pictures, which includes *The Gruffalo, The Gruffalo's Child, Room on the Broom* and *The Smeds and the Smoos.*

the wooden construction underneath their clothes and use the friction and limitation of movement to our advantage. They could not move like humans with a scarecrow suit on. I compared them to Barbie dolls — they are articulate, but in a 'less is more' way, it takes them some effort to bend through their knees."

The production teams at Red Star and Triggerfish Animation used Maya as the main program for modeling, animation, light and render (Arnold). Cutler used ZBrush to sculpt her initial characters, and the concept artist used Blender to create the first sets. Compositing was done in Fusion, and Photoshop was the program of choice for any 2D-related work. Apart from scripting, which had been worked on ahead of time, production took about 1.5 years.

When asked about the irresistible appeal of Donaldson's creations, the director replies, "Her books manage to fascinate a young audience with a combination of the recognizable and the fantastical," he explains. "Her text is deceptively simple for young ages, yet rich and engaging for adults. The amount of people who go online to claim they know every line by heart is just a token of how popular her work is. Every time we announce our cast for a new special, for instance, a parent will reply that no one can act out the characters as well as themselves — and I always love that mental picture of how special story time in a household must be with a Julia Donaldson book."

"There is something magical about the partnership between Julia and Axel Scheffler," he adds. "The style of our films is quite different from his illustrations, but they have the same immersive quality. It's a world that, as a child, you'd love to explore. Axel's work always makes you look twice, with things cleverly hidden in the background. It's a constant source for inspiration when we expand the story. I'm looking forward to seeing people's reaction to the hidden Gruffalo in *The Scarecrows' Wedding*!"

Of course, technology has evolved quite a bit since Magic Light's first collaboration with Donaldson, *The Gruffalo*, which debuted back in 2009. As Jaspaert points out, "The way we design, model, rig, animate, light and comp is still fairly similar to *Stick Man* 10 years ago, our first full CG production. However, costs definitely have gone up over the last few specials, but we have not given in on scope or quality. We feel these specials deserve to be 'special' to maintain that unique space of treasured family viewing over the Christmas period."

Fields of Glory

He adds that some things have only been possible with the latest tools. "The wheat field, for instance, is the result of a cleverly designed scatter system. It consists of 68,700 individual wheat stems, that can react to the motion of the characters and wind. I never thought we'd be able to have such a beautiful yet complex field, as that would not have been possible in the *Stick Man* days. It's a testament to the amazing skill set of our team that found those answers during production and made it look seamless with the rest of our well-known style."

As he awaits his labor of love's arrival on the BBC this month, Jaspaert says he's blown away by what the project's artists have achieved. "The final look of the film is just incredible," he says. "The shots look like miniature paintings to me. I love seeing how similar they are to our initial concept art and color keys. When you put them side by side and squint, it's hard to tell the difference. We have pushed for that tactile, richly lit stop-motion look, with a nice, narrow depth of field. It's a testament to Shannan Taylor, our art director, and the whole comp team, to never lose sight of the beautiful 2D art that inspired this film!" ■

***The Scarecrows' Wedding* premiered Christmas Day on BBC One.**

Seeking Better Lives in Alternate Worlds

Why the anime genre of *isekai* has grabbed the attention of so many fantasy fans around the world.

Top: *My Status as an Assassin*. Left: *Reborn as a Vending Machine, I Now Wander the Dungeon*

By Charles Solomon

The anime genre of *isekai* (ee-se-kai), which is defined as adventures set in alternate worlds, has grown enormously popular in the last two decades: Some of the most-watched anime series are *isekai* tales. Asa Suehira, chief content officer at Crunchyroll, comments, "When you look at the number of our top-performing series worldwide, you'll find that titles with *isekai* elements frequently rise to the top. That isn't just because of the fantasy setting, but because they deliver two things anime fans have come to expect: bold world-building and a hero's journey that feels dynamic and personal. That mix makes *isekai* uniquely compelling in today's global market."

The plots of many *isekai* series are very similar: An unimpressive hero or heroine is somehow transported to either an alternate world or the world of a game, where they acquire formidable powers that give them an importance they never enjoyed in real life. In some titles, the character dies and is reborn in the new environment. The main character in an *isekai* series is seldom the popular girl, the star athlete, the class rep or the company's ace salesman.

Increasing Powers

In the hit series *My Status as an Assassin Obviously Exceeds the Hero's*, Akira Oda is such a nondescript nerd, the other kids don't even realize he's their classmate. When the entire class is taken to an alternate world, Akira discovers that his power levels eclipse everyone else's. Mild-mannered Mihara Riyo in *Water Wizard* is told by a minor bureaucrat of a god that because his death was accidental, he's been granted a quiet life on another planet. Once there, he quickly masters powerful magic techniques.

In *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, programmer Ichiro Suzuki, who calls himself "a good little Japanese worker ant" debugs games for his employer. He falls asleep after working nonstop for 30 hours and finds himself in a mashup of two games. In the long-running *That Time I Got Reincarnated as Slime*, 37-year-old Satoru Mikami is stabbed by a thug in broad daylight. He dies bemoaning the fact he's never been on a date, only to awaken as a sentient blob in a cavern.

The stories occasionally take a comic turn. The *otaku* hero of *Reborn as a Vending Machine/Now I Walk the Dungeon* (2023) dies in a motorcycle accident — and is reincarnated as a coin-operated food and drink dispenser.

Not in Kansas Anymore

The genre isn't new: In *The Vision of Escaflowne* (1996), teenage psychic Hitomi

The Vision of Escaflowne

is transported to the planet Gaea, where she meets Prince Van of Fanelia. Miaka, the whiny heroine of *Fushigi Yugi* (1995), is pulled into the Chinese novel *The Universe of the Four Gods*, where she's hailed as the long-awaited priestess of Suzaku, in a blend of fantasy-adventure and slushy romance. Some critics see parallels between *isekai* tales and Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and *The Wizard of Oz*.

At a time when increasing numbers of young Japanese men face a very limited economic future, *isekai* stories seem to offer a welcome escape: Who wouldn't trade a cracker-box apartment and a string of underpaid jobs in the gig economy for power, enchanted weapons and adventures? But Matt Schley, a contributing writer at the *Japan Times*, explains in an interview, "According to one survey, the average age of *isekai* readers in Japan is 46, so it's actually not the young for whom *isekai* resonates most. It's people who have been in the workforce for a decade or more and are facing burnout, hitting an age where they're starting to question their paths. However, these middle-aged people are too responsible to just drop out and play video games all day; instead, they're getting their fix of wish fulfillment from quick bursts of anime and manga."

Japanese culture has traditionally stressed lifelong training to achieve technical mastery, whether it's in martial arts, calligraphy, pottery, swordsmanship, making sushi — or battling animated foes. Tanjiro Kamado, the hero of *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*, constantly strives to improve his fighting skills. Kafka Hibino and his comrades in Squad Three in *Kaiju No. 8* work nonstop to increase their strength in battle. In *Dragon Ball Z*, Goku continues training in the Other World after he dies.

Schley notes the instant gratification of *isekai* adventures stands in contrast to this grueling tradition: "A related theory is that manga about slowly getting stronger through sweat and hard work like *Dragon Ball* may no longer really resonate. People are interested in getting to the top in the easiest, most frictionless way possible. So manga or anime about being reincarnated in another world but retaining all your knowledge from your previous life and 'cheating' your way to the top is very appealing."

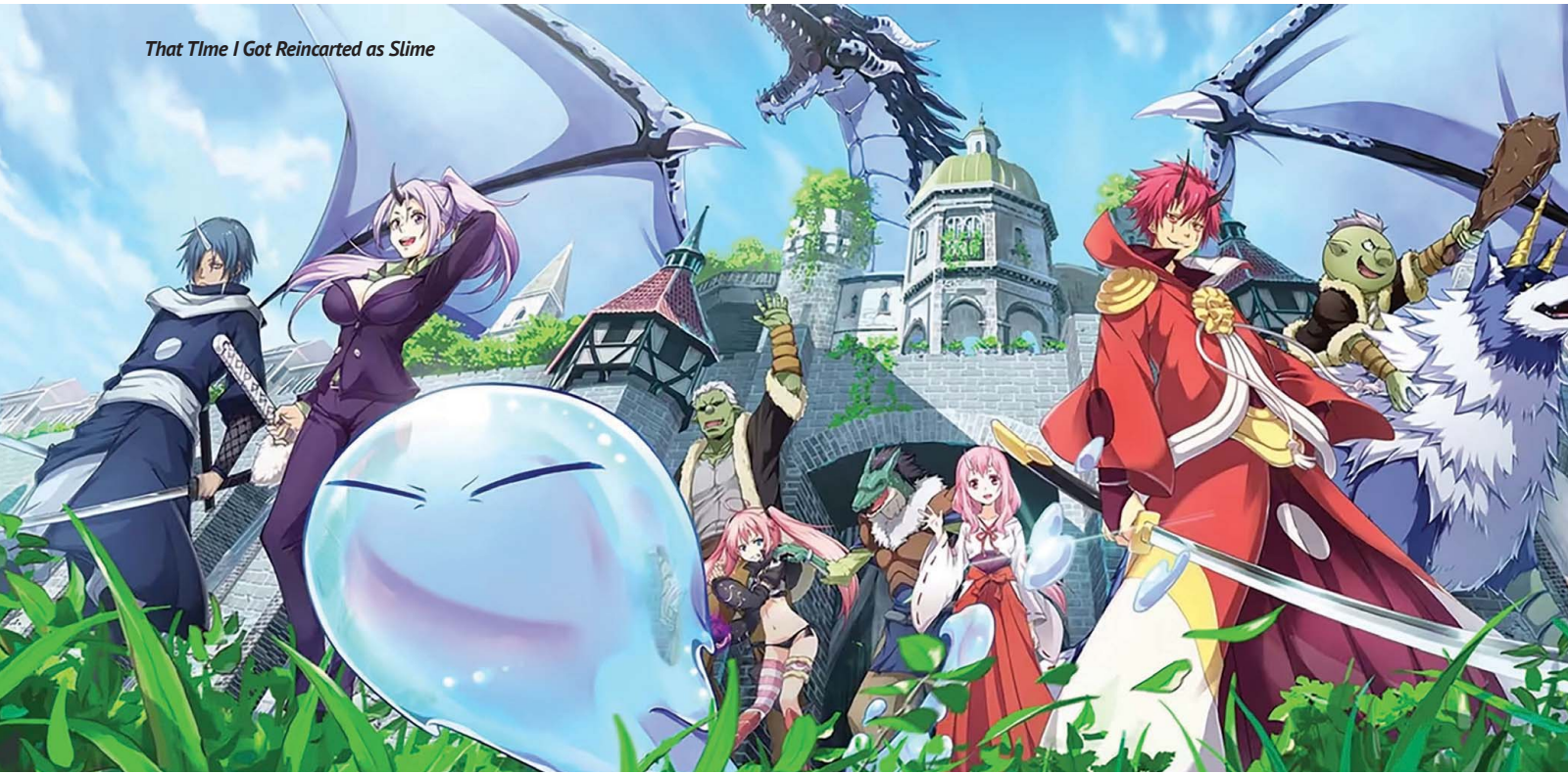
No More Cyber Trails

For centuries, individuals left their old lives to assume new identities somewhere else. Under the Tokugawa shoguns, men and women could disappear into the sprawling metropolis of Edo and start new lives. During the 19th century, people fled to the Western United States to escape debts, unhappy family situations or the limits of their hometowns.

But today, virtually everyone leaves a cyber trail that is almost impossible to erase or escape. Many *isekai* adventures include "starting over" in their titles, and countless men and women fantasize about chucking it all and starting over with a new career, a new partner, a new home, a new identity. But it's increasingly hard to do in today's wired world — unless you're the star of an *isekai* series. ■

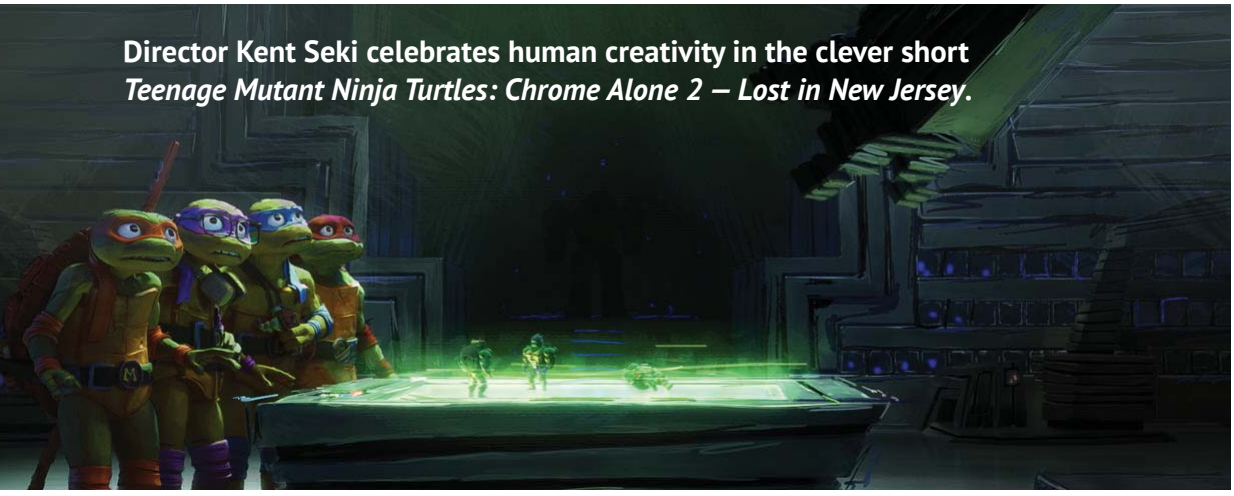
Charles Solomon is a film critic, historian and author whose latest books include *Animation for the People: An Illustrated History of the National Film Board of Canada* and *The Art of Mamoru Hosoda: The Man Who Leapt Through Time.*

"The average age of isekai readers in Japan is 46, so it's actually not the young for whom it resonates most. It's people who have been in the workforce for a decade or more and are facing burnout, hitting an age where they're starting to question their paths."



That TIme I Got Reincarted as Slime

Cowabunga! The Turtles Fight AI



Director Kent Seki celebrates human creativity in the clever short *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey*.

By Tom McLean

The success of the pizza-loving dudes' 2024 movie *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem* provided a unique opportunity for its director of cinematography, Kent Seki, to step into the director's chair for a new short, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey*. (If you're wondering how you missed *Chrome Alone 1*, don't worry — there isn't one.)

The short finds Donatello, Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael shopping for a Christmas gift for their mentor, Splinter, when they come across some really shoddy bootleg Turtles toys. They track down the maker of the toys to a New Jersey factory and come face-to-face with Chrome Dome, an AI machine that has incorporated into its identity just about every comic-book origin story under the sun.

Seki had always been a fan of the Turtles franchise. "I collected the comic in 1984," he says. "I was a huge Frank Miller fan at the time, and I couldn't believe that somebody was doing a parody of Frank Miller, and I loved that comic."

Perhaps the most AI-like aspect of the story is the villain's hilarious backstory, which Seki describes as "the amalgamation of a lot of backstories and the worst version of every backstory."

But that solution came somewhat late in production, Seki says. "We actually had a different version of it for most of the movie," he says. "There was a character named Archibald Mirthmaker … who was the toy company founder who created Chrome Dome, first as a computer, almost like he was Steve Jobs. He wore a black turtleneck and glasses, and then he changed and converted into a robot."

Bad Robot!

But something about it wasn't right, and it was executive producer Ramsay McBean who suggested trying a funnier approach. "What if we made the backstory like as if he was an AI, a robot made it up using AI? And I thought that was a great idea," Seki says.

Writer Andrew Joustra ran with the idea, with the storyboard artists taking it to another level and art director Garrett Lee incorporating it into the character's look.

"This is, again, that reaction to AI … How do we make the unconventional choice that relies more on the human eye than the computer tool to do what we want it to do?"
DIRECTOR KENT SEKI

"We were going to do these vector-line graphics for his face, because it was based on old-school video games like *Asteroids* or *Tempest* from Atari," Seki says. "It was Tiffany Lam, the production designer from the feature … We asked her, 'What do you think of AI art?' And she said there's one word that comes to mind: tacky. And that became a driving factor."

Inspirations included Terry Gilliam's classic Monty Python cutout animation, modernized with 8-bit graphics like you remember from old Nintendo games. "It was a collective thing that happened, and that's a great example of how the theme of AI brought us together to make something that was comedic and yet said something about the thing we were talking about," Seki says.

The look of the short builds off *Mutant Mayhem*. Seki says they were looking at teenage art — the kind of stuff everyone drew in high school. "That was really driven by the production designer, Yashar Kassai, as well as Tiffany Lam, the art director, and Arthur Fong, the other art director," he says. "We were building upon that, and in order to build upon that, we had to develop new shaders and tools to do Chrome Dome and to do metallic surfaces."

Seki was going for a more organic look, relying upon Mikros Animation's VFX supervisor, Matthieu Rouxel. "He's like a magician … who came up with methods to make the CG look like a hand-drawn and hand-rendered reflection, with highlights that crawl across the surface of these metal things."

He also compliments digital matte paint supervisor Arnaud Philippe-Giraux, who came up with the idea of using Grease Pencil in Blender to hand-draw crowds they couldn't afford to render in CG.

"And this is, again, that reaction to AI," Seki says. "How do we make the unconventional choice that relies more on the human eye than the computer tool to do what we want it to do?"

Seki says he's pleased with the final film, which was well received at a recent screening at SCAD. "The main thing for me was [that] we turned it into a celebration of human creativity," he says. "I think that's one reason why the short is resonating with so many people." ■

***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey* plays with *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants* in theaters beginning Dec. 19.**

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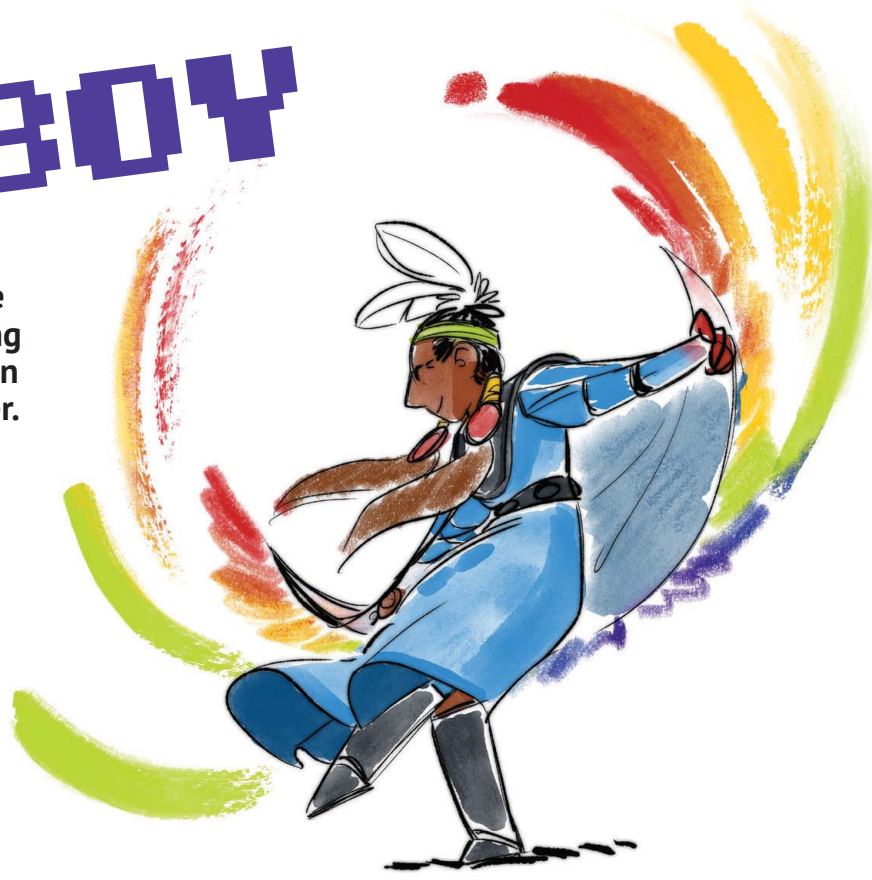


Director Joey Clift takes us along the creative journey of his award-winning short *Pow!*, which is based on his own experiences as a young Native gamer.

By Ramin Zahed

Joey Clift's charming animated short ***Pow!*** centers on a young Native American boy who tries to charge his video game console at a large powwow. The Oscar-qualified project has been lauded for its authentic subject matter and unique mix of animation styles (16-bit pixel art, hand-drawn 2D and a sequence inspired by Plains Native ledger art).

Clift, who has written for shows such as *PAW Patrol*, *Rubble & Crew*, *New Looney Tunes*, *Spirit Rangers* and *Molly of Denali*, is an enrolled member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe of Washington State, and grew up on the Tulalip reservation. "I'm very proud of my North American Indigenous heritage, but I am rarely given the opportunity to tell big, funny stories about modern Indigenous people in the cartoons I'm hired to write," he says.

The original idea for *Pow!* came about a few years ago as Clift felt the need to tell a story that featured people like himself. "I just wanted to make a film that showed that a Native kid can be as funny as Bart Simpson," he recalls. "Animation is an expensive process, so *Pow!* existed only as an idea for a while, but after the success of my Comedy Central Digital series *Gone Native*, I was given the support to make it happen in late 2023 from a fantastic organization called Pop Culture Collaborative. We exported the final cut of the film in early 2025."

Clift's Awakening

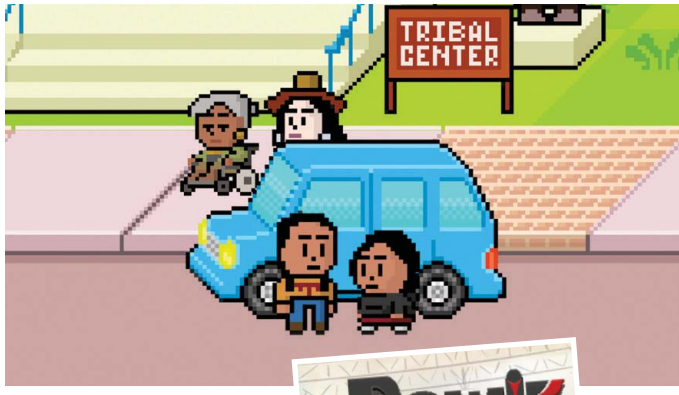
Pow! is loosely based on Clift's own experiences of being dragged by his mother to powwows when he was a kid. "I loved series like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* growing up, but because I didn't see authentic Native American characters in the shows I liked, I didn't think working in comedy or animation was something I was allowed to do," recalls the Emmy-winning writer-director. "In a lot of ways, *Pow!* is a story I've wanted to tell since I was that kid on the powwow bleachers playing *Link's Awakening* on a battery-powered Game Boy, not understanding why my mom brought me to this beautiful cultural event. I've dedicated a lot of my life to telling stories that I wish that kid had growing up, and that I'm glad kids from marginalized communities can have today."

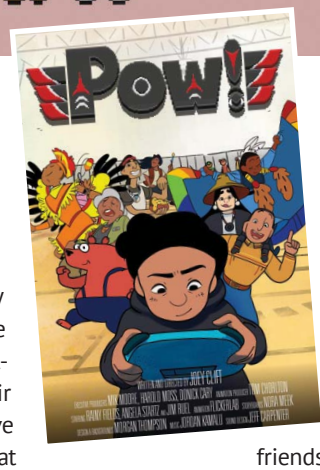
It was very important for Clift to put the *Pow!* team together with key involvement from a largely Indigenous cast and crew. "I brought these artists in because they can tell Native stories from an authentic and personal place, but also because they're some of the most talented people working in animation today," he says. "Native television shows and films have historically been made without Native people involved," he explains. "Stories are often told about us, but without us. I felt that deeply in the cartoons I watched growing up, where the only Native characters I saw were stereotypes like Apache Chief from *The Super Friends*, or old *Looney Tunes* shorts featuring Bugs Bunny in a cowboy hat shooting at 'savage' Native stereotypes. *Pow!* is a really specific film. It's one of the first films in North American animation to take place at a Coastal Salish intertribal powwow, to feature a sequence inspired by ledger art animation and to have a comedic runner where a frybread cook keeps accidentally dropping things into a frier."

The director mentions that Native filmmakers don't often receive the funding and support necessary to make big theatrical comedy short films. "Being given the opportunity to make *Pow!* was a gift and I put a lot of pressure on myself to honor that gift," he says. "What that meant in practice is, I said yes to a lot of really hard ideas, because I knew that, though they would take a lot of work to pull off, they would also be cool and meaningful to include."

One example is the short's ledger art

"*Pow!* is one of the first films in N. American animation to take place at a Coastal Salish intertribal powwow, to feature a sequence inspired by ledger art animation, and to have a comedic runner where a frybread cook keeps accidentally dropping things into a frier!"
POW! WRITER-DIRECTOR JOEY CLIFT





flashback sequence about halfway through the film. "Ledger art is a Plains Native art style originated in the 1800s," notes Clift. "Basically, when Native folks were forced onto reservations by the United States military, the soldiers left behind their military ledgers filled with their military notes. For the Native folks on these reservations, that was the only paper they had so they picked up these ledgers and drew art pieces on top of these notes, literally using art to heal their trauma."

He continues. "When we chose to animate that sequence as ledger art, it was important to me that the documents the animation rested on top of were treaties and artifacts important to the history of Native activism. To source these documents, I had to receive permission from the National Archives and several museums and colleges. At the end of that sequence, we even include actual audio from the Dakota Access Pipeline protests of the 2010s. It took months for me to track down and receive the right approvals to use that audio for something that is really only in the film for a few seconds, but it was important for me to go the extra mile whenever possible."

Looking back at experience of sharing his short with festival audiences around the globe, Clift says he's had many great responses. "A major goal of the film is to honor the Native activists whose decades of struggle made it possible for us to celebrate our culture. Legendary Native rights activist Leonard Peltier was at the South Dakota screening of *Pow!*, and I heard afterwards that he really enjoyed it, which was just so cool!" he says. "When I was accepted into Seattle International Film Festival, they scheduled a screening on the reservation I grew up on, in a tribal cultural center just two blocks from the house I lived in as a kid. It was the first time my mom was able to see one of my film screenings in person. To be able to thank the community that inspired the film in front of so many friends and family members wasn't just a career highlight, it was a life highlight.

"More broadly, I've really appreciated how universal the response to *Pow!* has been," he concludes. "It's a very Native film, but I've screened it everywhere, from international audiences in New Zealand who don't know about the specific struggles of North American Indigenous people, to non-Native comedy audiences in New York City, to big indie film fan audiences at big festivals all over the continent, to screenings in front of small tribal communities away from major cities. What's so cool about these screenings is, no matter how Native, non-Native or international the audience is, the laughs are in all of the same places and the emotional reactions are all in the same places. It's just so validating to see a story that might seem niche have such broad appeal. It turns out, Native stories are universal!" ■

***Pow!* screens on FNX – First Nations Experience platforms across broadcast, the FNX app and YouTube. The film is also available to Oscars voters in the Academy Screening Room. Learn more at gonenative.tv/pow.**

Leveling Up: Lauded for its authentic subject matter and unique mix of animation styles — 16-bit pixel art, hand-drawn 2D and a sequence inspired by Plains Indian ledger art, *Pow!* is among the shorts qualified for Oscar consideration this year.

HANDICAPPING THIS YEAR'S BIGGEST VISUAL EFFECTS CONTENDERS

OSCAR WATCH

A regular mix of spectacular and invisible effects will be competing against each other for Oscar glory at the 98th Academy Awards. However, what makes things rather unusual this year is the lack of any clear favorites. Among the possibilities: the live-action remake of a DreamWorks classic that takes dragon riding to new heights, a reincarnation of Frankenstein's monster and clones interacting in outer space. One thing they all have in common is that the digital and practical effects artists went to great heights to honor the filmmaker's vision and capture the imagination of audiences. Here are this year's big visual effects contenders:

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

Director: James Cameron
Released by: 20th Century Studios
Release Date: Dec. 19, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Richard Baneham
VFX Houses: Wētā FX, ILM
The Breakdown: Even with a spectacular aerial battle, which shows the Ash People on the warpath, the real highlight of this movie is their mentally unstable leader Varang (as performed by Oona Chaplin) as well as the desolate homeland that was rebuilt after being decimated by a volcanic eruption. The film's visually stunning new creature is the Medusoid that resembles a floating jellyfish while the human threat is elevated with the appearance of the factory ship as it takes the killing and processing of Tulkun to a massive industrial level.

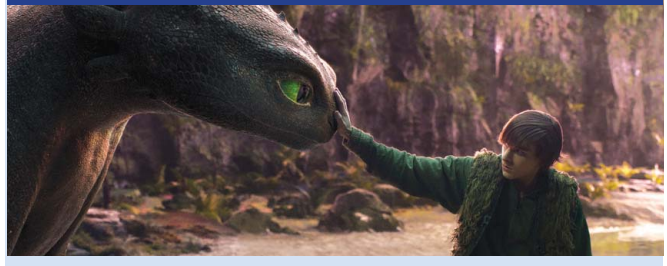
F1: THE MOVIE

Director: Joseph Kosinski
Released by: Apple TV, Warner Bros. Pictures
Release Date: June 17, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Ryan Tudhope
VFX Houses: Framestore, ILM, Red VFX, Lola VFX, Metaphysic
The Breakdown: Digitally reskinning vehicles has become an art form in the films of Joseph Kosinski, who swaps fighter jets for their grounded counterparts, Formula One race cars, in this early-summer hit. The technique allowed for maintaining continuity and shooting during actual races. The film features a fiery crash that was a combined effort, with special effects launching the car in the air and visual effects painting out the cameras, replacing the floor and enhancing the explosion.

FRANKENSTEIN

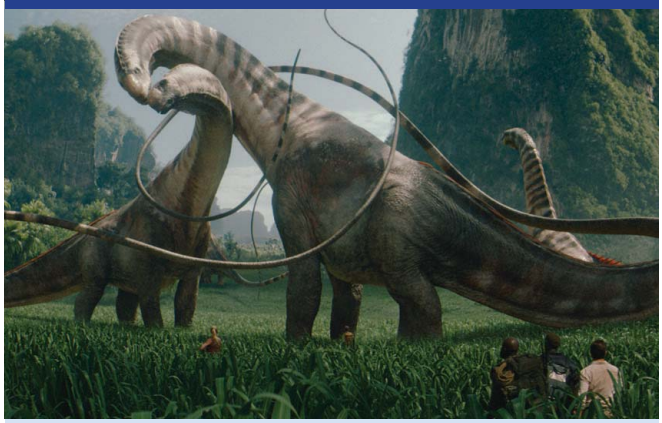
Director: Guillermo del Toro
Released by: Netflix
Release Date: Oct. 17, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Dennis Berardi
VFX Houses: Herne Hill Media/ Mr. X, ILM, Ticket VFX
The Breakdown: Hard to believe, but the frozen Arctic environment was actually a set-dressed parking lot in Toronto with a practically built ship. A puppeteered torso of a corpse catches a ball, and a miniature explodes for the moment when the water tower is engulfed in flames and collapses. Vicious wolves, endearing mice and a beautiful butterfly were among the CG creatures featured in del Toro's new epic, while the iconic creation scene was made more dramatic by keeping track of the progression of the storm through background replacements, set extensions, CG rain and lightning.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON



Director: Dean DeBlois
Released by: Universal
Release Date: June 13, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Christian Manz
VFX House: Framestore
The Breakdown: To complete the enormous number of shots requiring interaction between CG creatures and live-action actors, the work was divided between facilities in London, Montreal, Melbourne, Mumbai and an in-house team. Among the highlights are the re-creation of the scene from the original animated movie where Hiccup stretches out his hand to touch Toothless, as well as the tailoring of different types of fire to suit the personality of each type of dragon. The film was also widely praised for its realistic depiction of the flying scenes with a real human rider.

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH



Director: Gareth Edwards
Released by: Universal
Release Date: July 2, 2025
VFX Supervisor: David Vickery
VFX Houses: ILM, Important Looking Pirates
The Breakdown: Designing the unpredictable and ferocious disfigured Mutadon, which has semitranslucent skin, was challenging because it needed to avoid looking monstrous and fit within the *Jurassic* universe of dinosaurs. The entire approach toward muscle and skin simulations was revamped, with a procedural deformer adding high-resolution, dynamic wrinkle details to the creatures. Artists simulated the realistic water disturbances and trails left by creatures like the Mosasaurus as they moved through the water, and a new whitewater solver was developed to make the behavior of the splashes more believable.

MICKEY 17

Director: Bong Joon Ho
Released by: Warner Bros. Pictures
Release Date: March 7, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Dan Glass
VFX Houses: DNEG, Framestore, Rising Sun Pictures, Turncoat Pictures
The Breakdown: Some of the hardest creatures to animate in the movie were the Creepers, because they had multiple legs inside and outside, external and internal mandibles, four sets of eyelids, tentacles, a tail and tongue; all of these physical attributes had to have movement and be art directed. The Mickey clones also get killed in various humorous ways, such as by getting dumped into lava several times, and the wintry environment of Niflheim meant that careful attention had to be paid to snow and ice, with the latter posing a significant rendering challenge.

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE – THE FINAL RECKONING

Director: Christopher McQuarrie
Released by: Paramount
Release Date: May 23, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Alex Wuttke
VFX Houses: ILM, beloFX, BlueBolt, MPC, One of Us, RISE, Rodeo FX, Untold Studios, Filmograph
The Breakdown: A signature action sequence has Tom Cruise attempting to reach a sunken Russian submarine; the exterior shots were entirely digital, plenty of rigs were painted out, and particulates had to be added in post to get the desired murkiness. The hardest effect was the end-of-the-world scene where cities are being destroyed in full CG. Other digital contributions include the addition of muzzle flashes and the replacement of reflections and blue screens.

PREDATOR: BADLANDS

Director: Dan Trachtenberg
Released by: 20th Century Studios
Release Date: Nov. 7, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Olivier Dumont
VFX Houses: Wētā FX, Trixter, Important Looking Pirates, The Yard VFX, Framestore, ILM
The Breakdown: The VFX team had their work cut out for them as the film's lead character is the torso of a destroyed android strapped to the back of a Predator. This was achieved by painting out the lower body of actress Elle Fanning, who typically wore blue spandex, and camera match-moving her full body, which allowed for a CG version of her detached torso or legs. The formidable and terrifying adversary Kalisk was brought to life using keyframe animation, based on live-action references of big cats and bears.

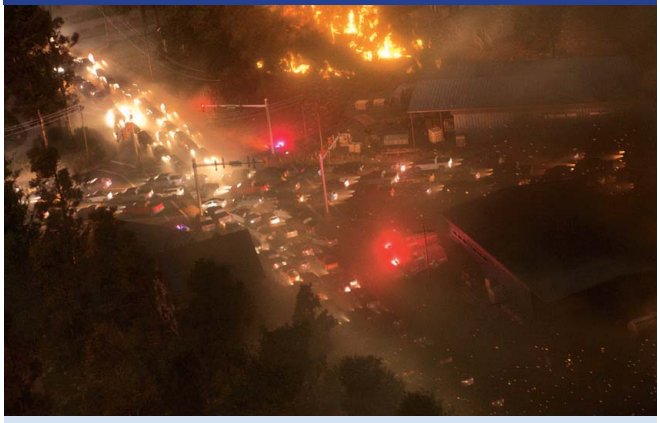
SINNERS

Director: Ryan Coogler
Released by: Warner Bros. Pictures
Release Date: April 18, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Michael Ralla
VFX Houses: Storm Studios, Rising Sun Pictures, ILM, Baraboom Studios, Light VFX, Base FX, Outpost VFX
The Breakdown: Having an actor play twin brothers who share a cigarette with one another sounds simple enough, but the actual execution was a production in itself. Consisting of 10 to 12 cameras, a Halo rig circled the face of Michael B. Jordan, which allowed for his real head to be placed upon a stand-in rather than a CG replica. Among the many highlights: a vampire turns into a flaming tornado as the sun rises, a CG train arrives at a station and Louisiana gets transformed into 1930s Mississippi with fields of cotton on the horizon.

SUPERMAN

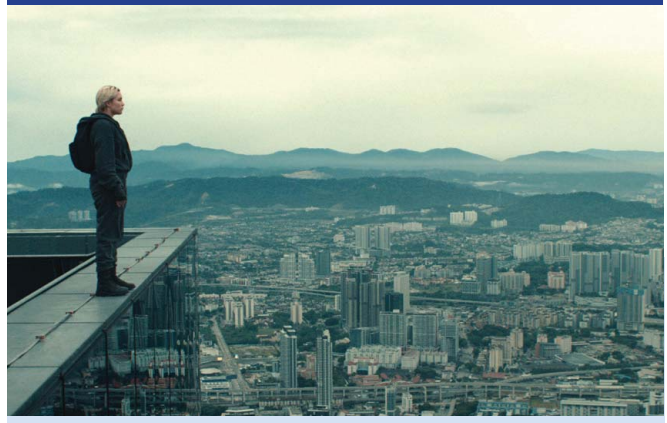
Director: James Gunn
Released by: Warner Bros. Pictures
Release Date: July 11, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Stephane Ceretti
VFX Houses: Framestore, ILM, Wētā FX, Rodeo FX
The Breakdown: The film's rambunctious canine Krypto was created entirely in CG along with Robot #4, which was voiced and performed by Alan Tudyk. Other visual highlights were a complex proton waterway called the River of Pi and the reflections and refractions caused by the thousands of crystals that make up the Fortress of Solitude. Also, Nanite particles enable the Engineer to shape-shift and turn her forearm into the spinning disc that can detach, fly around, shred robots and reattach.

THE LOST BUS



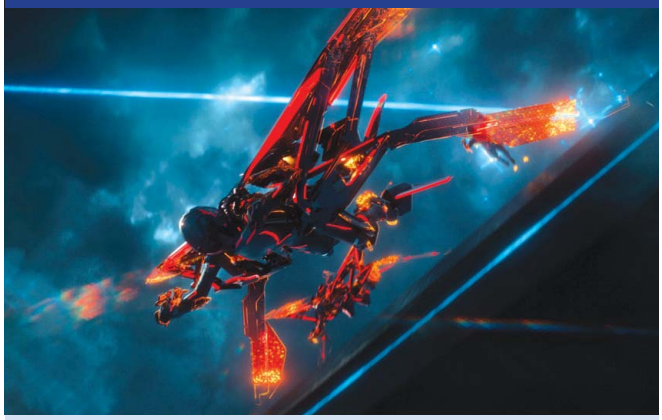
Director: Paul Greengrass
Released by: Apple TV
Release Date: Sept. 19, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Charlie Noble
VFX Houses: beloFX, Cinesite, ILM, RISE, Outpost VFX, Vitality Visual Effects, Mist VFX, Host VFX
The Breakdown: Ironically, real forest fires hampered principal photography, which in turn increased the need for digital augmentation. Unreal Engine was crucial in establishing the seven key looks of Paradise, Calif., as the fire progresses through the town. The main technical challenge was capturing the sheer scope of smoke and fire that existed during the actual event, which required multiple types of trees, bushes, shops, cars, various flame ferocities, wind strengths and plenty of embers.

THUNDERBOLTS*



Director: Jake Schreier
Released by: Disney
Release Date: May 2, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Jake Morrison
VFX Houses: ILM, Framestore, Digital Domain, Rising Sun Pictures, Raynault VFX, Base FX, Crafty Apes, Mammal Studios
The Breakdown: Actor Florence Pugh jumps off the second-tallest building in the world and calmly walks away; she also has to navigate through the various trauma rooms inside of Bob's mind, which was achieved practically. The biggest task was creating the three types of Void effects, where individuals get turned into projected silhouettes of themselves, and causing that to spread throughout the city. Having four or five people fighting each other coming from different angles complicated the vault sequence, which was resolved by shooting stunt visuals to figure out the overall choreography.

TRON: ARES



Director: Joachim Rønning
Released by: Disney
Release Date: Oct. 10, 2025
VFX Supervisor: David Seager
VFX Houses: ILM, Distillery VFX, Image Engine, GMUNK, Lola VFX, Opsis
The Breakdown: While a Skimmer causes giant voxelated raster tails of bioluminescence and water spray as it travels through the Grid, modified electric Harley-Davidson bikes adorned with LED bricks were proxy versions of Light Cycles that find themselves transported to the real world. A signature moment is when a pursuing police car gets sliced in half by a Light Ribbon, which was a combination of practical and digital effects. Complicating the Light Ribbon effects was the need to show their history throughout shots.

WARFARE

Director: Alex Garland, Ray Mendoza
Released by: A24
Release Date: April 11, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Simon Stanley-Clamp
VFX House: Cinesite
The Breakdown: A lot of shots involved "heal and reveal," which meant painting out bullet hits and explosions, letting them back in and moving them to the desired location. The "show of force" shots, which featured a screeching U.S. fighter jet that stirs up massive amounts of dust, was a Houdini simulation with some assistance from on-set fans blowing trees and laundry and a CG plane. A giant bluescreen carpet was laid down on an airfield runway to shoot the drone footage showing the whereabouts of the soldiers and insurgents.

HONORARY MENTIONS

28 Years Later
Sony Pictures Releasing

Captain America: Brave New World
Walt Disney Studios

Paddington in Peru
StudioCanal, Columbia Pictures

The Electric State
Netflix

The Fantastic Four: First Steps
Walt Disney Studios

The Gorge
Apple TV

A Minecraft Movie
Warner Bros. Pictures

The VFX shortlist will be announced on Dec. 16, 2025. From that list, the final five nominees will be determined by the visual effects branch of the academy.

WICKED: FOR GOOD

Director: Jon M. Chu
Released by: Universal
Release Date: Nov. 21, 2025
VFX Supervisor: Pablo Helman
VFX Houses: ILM, Framestore, Rising Sun Pictures, Outpost VFX, BOT VFX, FOY
The Breakdown: The musical set piece where Glinda sings "*The Girl in the Bubble*" in front of a mirror required seven plates, the camera going behind the mirror about five times, tricky morphs, dress replacements and two and a half years of work. The long tail of the Cowardly Lion also had to be treated as a character in its own right. The world-building was expanded by having aerial views of Emerald City, and the iconic tornado that brings Dorothy and Toto to Oz gets a major cinematic moment.

CONJURING MORE MAGIC TRICKS IN OZ

WICKED: FOR GOOD'S VFX SUPERVISOR PABLO HELMAN GIVES US A TOUR OF THE SEQUEL'S NEW VISUAL DELIGHTS AND CHALLENGES. BY TREVOR HOGG

This holiday season, audiences finally get to see the tale of Elphaba and Glinda merge with the story of Dorothy Gale and *The Wizard of Oz* in *Wicked: For Good*, when the sequel to last year's blockbuster extravaganza hits theaters. As the film's visual effects supervisor Pablo Helman tells *Animation Magazine*, "There's a lot of stuff that we have prepared for the second movie that was not in the first movie. What we take from movie one to movie two are the relationships that you have with the filmmaking because now we finish each other's sentences. We know exactly what the director [Jon M. Chu] wants. Everybody has their act together in regards to what movie we're making."

The four-time Oscar-nominated VFX veteran points out that a major difference this time around was having to share assets between various visual effects companies that were working on the sequel. "That's not something which is fun," he says. "How do you take a look at the financial part and say, 'How do you advertise Elphaba's cape that was done by ILM and Framestore?' That was a double asset we had to do because we had different sequences that we needed to do. We kept the flying and the monkeys with ILM, and the majority of the other animals went to Framestore because there's no place like home."

He also mentions that Dulcibear, the kindly brown bear that raised Elphaba and Nessarose, was a shared asset between ILM and Framestore. "The rigging part is not something that we can still share because facilities have their own culture and way of doing things, which are valid for their specific reasons. I'm not there to arbitrate between facilities in terms of rigging. The only thing that I'm interested in is the result and that our director is seeing what he needs."

VFX Wizards to the Rescue

Even though the visual effects shot count between *Wicked* and *Wicked: For Good* remained essentially the same, at more than 1,800, the shots for the sequel proved more difficult and longer to produce for ILM, Framestore, Rising Sun Pictures, Outpost VFX, OPSIS, BOT VFX, FOY and an in-house team led by Pauline Duvall.

One particular sequence took two and a half years to complete. "Right at the turn of the third act, Glinda sings '*Girl in the Bubble*,' where she confronts herself as to who she is, and that is a three-minute sequence with a brand-new song; that had seven plates in it which had her looking into the mirror," reveals Helman. "The camera goes behind the mirror about five times. It comes around once and we are inside the mirror, then everything is reversed. We come out of the mirror, and everything straightens itself. We do that about four times. Her apartment is full of mirrors, so she looks at herself in the mirror a bunch of times. The camera goes in and out and goes through a walk-in closet that was half practical. We did a CG closet for the reflection part that we go into. You just have to see the shot. It's difficult for me to describe!"

Re-creating the powerful tornado that brings the iconic farmhouse carrying Dorothy and Toto to the Land of Oz was a daunting

No Place Like Home: Elphaba, the future Wicked Witch of the West (Cynthia Erivo) and Glinda, the Good Witch (Ariana Grande), continue their adventures in *Wicked: For Good*, which features more than 1,800 shots produced by ILM, Framestore, Rising Sun Pictures, Outpost VFX, OPSIS, BOT VFX and FOY.

> "The Cowardly Lion's tail is slapping around, but sometimes you cheat and put it where you need it to be. It is awkward to have a tail that long. Part of the challenge was to take a look at what the tail is doing. Then there's all of the fur and grooming of a cute-looking lion."

challenge. "Every time you're talking about tornadoes, you're talking about a huge particle simulation team," notes Helman. "Also, there's the aesthetic of a tornado basically approaching a specific place. Sometimes you have a tornado sequence that shows tornadoes all around a geographic place. But for us, we had to make sure that they started at Emerald City and end up over Nessarose and Munchkinland. The second part is we need to make sure that the tornadoes are doing the right thing. At the same time that the tornadoes are going after Nessarose, they destroy the Yellow Brick Road on the way. That was something else that we had to put in there. Then, there is the blessing of lighting. How do you light a tornado? You have lightning and all kinds of flashes and things that allow you to backlight the tornado and take a look at what's inside of it — in this case, a farmhouse. The farmhouse going around the tornado was a particle system in itself."

One of the new additions to the sequel is the Cowardly Lion, who is played by Colman Domingo. "He's not just a lion," observes Helman. "He already gives us a kind of an attitude that we need to put in there. How do you do cowardly? There's a lot of passive-aggressiveness in the way the lion talks and the attitude of it. It's like saying something but then regretting that you said it and thinking about the consequences of what it is that the lion is saying. There was a lot of talking to Jon Chu about: What is it that this lion needs to do for us? There's the cowardly part, but also, we need to be sympathetic towards it."

Another distinct trait of the big cat is his long tail, which was extra tricky. "We needed to give it some business," says the VFX supe. "In other words, it's not just the lion. It is the lion and the tail. The tail is slapping around, but sometimes you cheat and put it where you need it to be. It is awkward to have a tail that long. Part of the challenge was to take a look at what the tail is doing. Then there's all of the fur and grooming of a cute-looking lion."

Pablo Helman

Established environments in the sequel are also viewed from new perspectives. "The Emerald City that we see is a lot bigger, and we see different parts that we haven't seen before," remarks Helman. "For the first time we are looking down on Emerald City, where the other [shots] were wide. In the first movie, we did that just for one take but were actually at ground level. On this one we do both. We are ground level looking up, and we're up looking down. That puts the epic part of it into the picture because now we're seeing that the world is bigger than what we thought."

Helman adds, "The rendering of shaders can get expensive depending on how you want to render a wide shot that has some sections which are close camera and others that are far away; that's the management of resources. Also, you can never see the shot properly until you actually render it in a high quality and high resolution, so it's a trust thing [with the director]."

Music to His Ears

Chu's background as a professional musician also came in handy when crafting the musical set pieces. "It works in terms of considering the work that we do that goes with the tone of the scene," says Helman. "There are some sections where the music swells, and so maybe the hair moves in a specific way, or maybe the confetti stops rotating and it has a different speed than the actual live-action footage. All that is part of Jon's sensibility. The other thing that it helps with is the rhythm of a dialog scene, for instance, that is actually sung, and how the cuts go. Sometimes the music will cue an eyebrow or a look. There was a lot of counting beats!"

Looking back, Helman says there were no major surprises during the production. "It played out in the same way that I thought," he concludes. "How do you make something epic? How do you deal with 100% CG shots? How do you get as much as possible in camera and work with production design, wardrobe, makeup and hair. I was calm throughout, because I trust that the people I work with know what they're doing. If you are good at communicating and have the resources, there is no reason for panic!" ■

Universal's *Wicked: For Good* is currently playing in theaters around the world.

> The movie had an opening weekend box office of $150 million in the U.S. and $226 million globally, setting a new record for a film adaptation of a Broadway show.

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Tech Reviews

By Todd Sheridan Perry

Storm: The Simulation Tool

The world of dynamic simulations can often feel like a labyrinth of nodes, solvers and compute caches, each with its own quirks and limitations. Storm, the standalone simulation environment from indie developer and FX artist Sebastian Schäfer, was developed way back in 2018 to simplify that chaos — and in doing so, it's quietly becoming one of the most approachable multiphysics tools out there. It's compact, fast and deceptively powerful, especially for artists who need granular control without the overhead of a full-blown DCC package.

At its core, Storm is built around a particle-based physics engine that can handle grains, cloth, soft bodies, SPH fluids and even gaseous simulations like smoke and fire. The software's early claim to fame was its granular solver — capable of rendering sand, snow and soil with convincing mass and cohesion. Since then, it's evolved into a more versatile multiphysics platform. Cloth simulations now have robust constraint systems for stretch, bend and shear, and can even tear dynamically. Fluids are solved through SPH (Smoothed Particle Hydrodynamics), offering natural liquid motion and interaction with other particle types and colliders. Also, in early beta now is a FLIP-based version of the solver called Storm HydroFX, which runs on its own, but there seems to be plans to incorporate HydroFX into the rest of the ecosystem.

One of Storm's biggest strengths is its real-time responsiveness. Thanks to heavy multithreading and GPU acceleration (CUDA on Windows), you can easily push millions of particles and still scrub interactively in the viewport. This makes iteration genuinely enjoyable — a welcome change from the bake-and-wait workflow typical of more mature simulation environments. You can quickly adjust parameters like density, viscosity or friction and see the results right away. Artists coming from Houdini or RealFlow will immediately notice the speed difference, particularly during setup and preview stages.

The node-based workflow is a newer feature in Storm. It strikes a nice balance between procedural flexibility and clarity — you can link emitters, colliders, forces and meshing nodes in a visual graph, but the interface remains clean and uncluttered. Post-processing nodes let you convert particles to meshes or volumes (VDBs), delete or edit particle sets and cache data for export. It's procedural without being intimidating, and the learning curve is surprisingly gentle for something this capable.

On the I/O side, Storm supports all the formats you'd expect — Alembic, VDB, OBJ, PRT and BIN — so integration into Houdini, Maya, 3ds Max or Nuke pipelines is straightforward. You can simulate in Storm, mesh or volume-convert, and then render elsewhere with full motion continuity. It's a genuinely portable step in a modern FX pipeline. And since it's standalone, you're not paying for a full 3D package just to get great simulation tools.

Storm doesn't try to be Houdini, and that's precisely its charm. It's not just a granular solver; it's a unified playground for digital physics. And with HydroFX in development, it's only getting better. ■

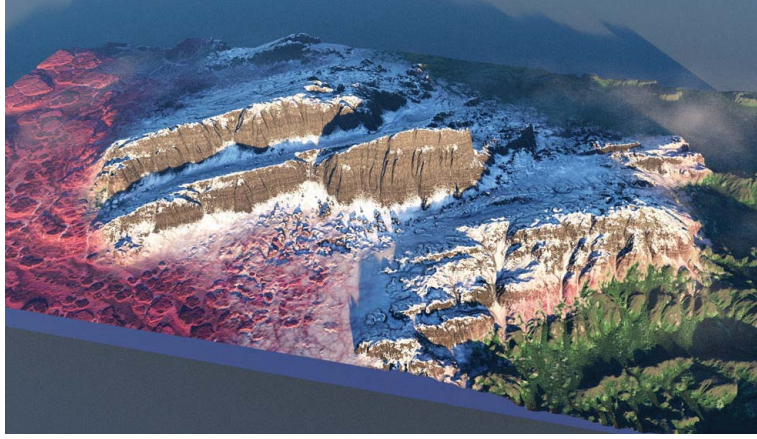
Website: storm-vfx.com
Price: Different rates available for students, indies and studios.

World Creator 2025

World Creator 2025.1 is not just another incremental update — it's a serious step forward that reshapes how artists build worlds. Earlier versions already gave us real-time GPU terrain sculpting and procedural filters, but this new release feels like the point where the tool evolves from a terrain generator into a full-blown world creation platform.

The most striking change is the introduction of the new biome system, which lets you paint, blend and manage ecosystems directly inside your scene. Rather than layering filters and masks, you define entire environments — desert, forest, volcanic plain — and paint them like textures. The software takes care of the blending and transitions automatically, which means seamless shifts from mountain forest to rocky tundra without any manual tweaking. Older versions relied heavily on sculpting and procedural filters; this is faster, more intuitive and much closer to how artists think.

Another major upgrade is the ability to import and scatter your own 3D models. Previous builds limited you to packaged assets and procedural vegetation, but 2025.1 opens the door to fully customizable scenes. You can bring in your own buildings, props or trees, drop them into the landscape, and the terrain automatically flattens underneath them for perfect placement. Combined with the expanded asset library of royalty-free models now built into the program, it's much



easier to populate an entire environment that feels cohesive and lived in.

Visual quality has also taken a huge leap. The rendering pipeline has been rebuilt with support for emissive materials, displacement, height-blending, LUTs and real-time environment mapping. A new denoiser makes the viewport output cleaner and closer to a final render. Where older versions looked like sophisticated previews, 2025.1's results often look ready for presentation or previs right out of the box. It's still real time, but now it feels cinematic.

Performance remains a standout. The engine has been optimized to handle hundreds of millions of scattered assets without bogging down your hardware, though it definitely rewards strong GPUs. Export options have expanded as well — new formats like ASC and XYZ maps join the existing lineup of meshes, height maps and splat maps, making it easier to move your terrains into Unreal, Unity or Blender with all your biome and material data intact.

Altogether, the new version feels like the culmination of years of iteration. If the 2024 builds were focused on terrain sculpting and procedural refinement, 2025.1 feels like the moment where World Creator earns its name. Some of the newest features are marked as beta, so they may be rough, and you'll want a powerful GPU to keep up with the scale of what is now possible. But even with those caveats, this release marks a real evolution for the software.

For environment artists, motion-graphics designers and anyone who needs large-scale, high-fidelity terrains without the grind, World Creator 2025.1 is easily the most significant version yet. It's smarter, faster and more cinematic — an update that turns a great terrain tool into a complete world-building platform. ■

Website: world-creator.com
Price: $149 (indie), $249 (professional); $499 (studio); $1,699 (enterprise)

Chaos Vantage 3.0

Chaos Vantage 3.0 doesn't feel like a routine update — it feels like the moment when the tool stops being just a super-fast real-time viewer and starts behaving like a fully capable real-time production engine. If you've used earlier versions of Vantage, you know it excelled at letting you drop large scenes into a fully ray-traced viewport and iterate fast. With version 3.0, though, the scale, flexibility and creative freedom take a big leap.

The main headline is open standards support: Vantage 3.0 introduces full support for USD (Universal Scene Description) and MaterialX. This means that scenes from, say, Maya, Houdini, 3ds Max or other DCCs can now be imported and rendered in Vantage with far fewer roadblocks, and you're not locked into a single proprietary ecosystem. Combine that with the new material editor (so you can tweak shaders inside Vantage without bouncing back to your host app) and you begin to see how the workflow becomes much smoother.

Then there's the push into real-world capture and volumetric realism. Vantage 3.0 adds support for volumetric rendering (fog, light rays, smoke) and for Gaussian splats (point-cloud/photogrammetry-style data rendered in real time alongside geometry). What that means is you can now import big, captured environments (streetscapes, scanned sets) and still have Vantage handle them interactively. On top of that, Vantage

supports camera tracking, offset animation and scatter clustering enhancements so you can build bigger scenes, animate them, place crowds or repeated motion and still stay in real time.

Material-and-texture workflows get love too. The built-in AI Material Generator (via the Cosmos browser) can turn any photo into a PBR material inside Vantage, meaning fewer external steps for secondary surface fill-ins. Texture mapping has been expanded with full control over sub-maps, probability controls and front/back surface definitions. This is especially useful when you're working with large asset libraries or iterative scenes.

From a user-experience standpoint, Vantage 3.0 introduces a reworked interface and a massively expanded asset library so you can populate scenes more quickly than ever.

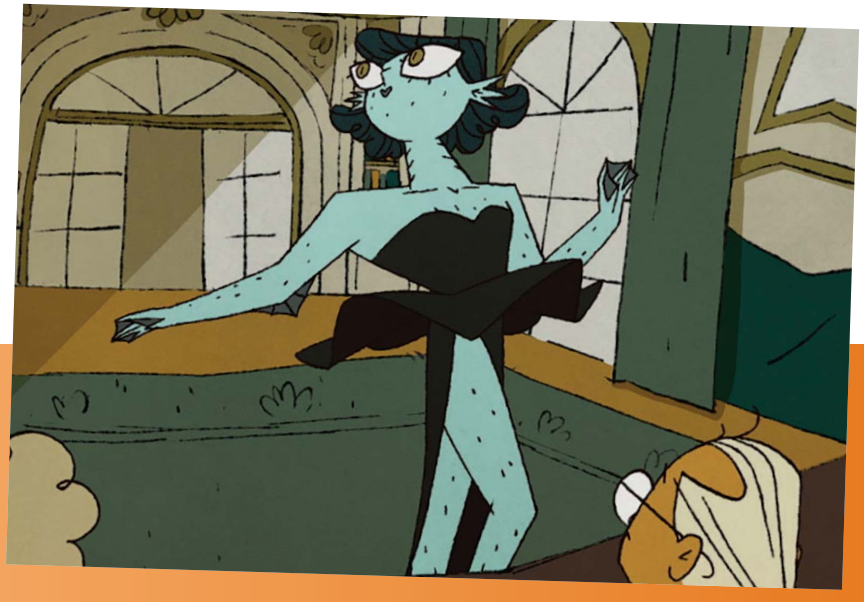
As with any major leap, there are trade-offs. While the set of features is impressive, the hardware requirements climb accordingly — to really take advantage of volumetrics, splats, huge scene datasets and real-time ray tracing with open standards, you'll want a high-end GPU. Also, some workflows (especially the newer ones like USD import, volumetrics) may still show early-phase quirks.

In summary, Vantage 3.0 feels less like "just a version update" and more like a redefinition of what Vantage can be. For artists working in architectural viz, previz or even full-scale real-time production, this version moves the needle in both flexibility and creative potential. If you're already using earlier versions of Vantage or you're evaluating real-time engines for professional pipelines, this update deserves serious consideration. ■

Website: chaos.com/vantage-3
Price: Various

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose recent credits include *I'm a Virgo*, *For All Mankind* and *Black Panther*. He can be reached at todd@teaspoonvfx.com.

A DAY IN THE LIFE



This month, talented French artist and director **Cynthia Calvi**, whose latest short ***Gigi*** has received several awards and qualified for Oscar consideration, gave us a peek in to her colorful life in Lille.

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